RIO RITA

NOVELIZED BY
HARRY
SINCLAIR
DRAGO

STORY BY
GUY BOLTON
AND
FRED THOMPSON

Florence Jacobson

"Oh, yes I have, many times from over there," and Jim pointed to the American side of the river.

(Page 68)

(Scene from the Radio Picture, Rio Rita, with Bebe Daniels as Rio Rita and John Boles as Captain Jim Stewart)

RIO RITA

Novelized by

HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO

from

THE RADIO PICTURES'

adaptation of

FLORENZ ZIEGFELD'S OPERETTA

ILLUSTRATED WITH SCENES
FROM THE PHOTOPLAY

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	The Kinkajou Leaves His Card	5
II.	Beside the Rio Grande	23
III.	Easy Picking	37
IV.	Rio Rita	45
V.	In a Mexican Garden	63
VI.	At the Mesa Franceisca	75
VII.	Only One Can Win	91
VIII.	A Little Matter of Money	102
IX.	Lovett Makes Hay	114
X.	"That Gringo"	125
XI.	In the Dark	136
XII.	"You Are My Guest"	150
XIII.	Adios Amor	165
XIV.	Through the Chapparal	180
XV.	The Measure of a Man	194
XVI.	"You Will Never Marry Esteban!"	205
XVII.	The Club Esteban	216
XVIII.	The River of Dreams	230
XIX.	The Road of Romance	242

RIO RITA

CHAPTER I

THE KINKAJOU LEAVES HIS CARD

EVENING was not far off. All day long the heat waves had danced across the arid, sunburnt waste that was southern Texas. To the south, beyond the murky flood of the Rio Grande, rose the bare, brown hills of old Mexico, silent and inhospitable.

Stretching away across the long, interminable desert miles, ankle-deep in its own dust, wound the road that eventually brought one to Fremont and the dozen and one other border towns of south Texas where the common denominator was a million—whether it referred to acres, oil or cattle.

Of those turbulent, ever-boisterous towns beyond, locally known as the *Whoopee Belt*, there was no hint in the vista spread out before the plunging motor bus that bobbed up

and down over the corduroyed road and slithered around madly in the loose gravel that by the grace of God and the sovereign state of Texas dignified the age-old trail with the name of road.

Here had Penalosa passed, and the other golden sons of old Spain, Cabeca de Vaca, Coronado—men whose names are still remembered in certain parts of the New World. Finding it not unlovely, they had tarried there, and left it as a heritage to the children of the *conquistadores.*

Almost three hundred years had intervened since the days that were and the one so rapidly drawing to a close now. In all that time the hills had not changed; the cactus and chaparral had not given place to fields of grain or blossoming orchards; the coyote and jack-rabbit still played their endless game of life and death; neither fence nor house broke the horizon. Not even the road had changed—except for that gravel—

"That damned gravel!" grumbled the dust-covered driver of the big stage as it careened around a curve.

It was stifling hot in the stage.

"How much longer is this going to last?" demanded a salesman making his first trip through the country.

"She'll cool off pretty quick now," the driver told him carelessly, himself unmindful of the weather. "Breeze from the Gulf will hit us in less than an hour."

The salesman, who hailed from Los Angeles, where the weather is always perfect, except when it is *unusual,* mopped his brow and told himself that in his country something would have been done about it.

True to the driver's prediction, a breeze, cool and invigorating, sprang up presently. The brown hills across the line began to lose their forbidding aspect. Great splotches of vermillion began to daub their peaks, as the Master Painter, relenting at last, set out to bedeck them in gorgeous hues of purple, red and blue.

Slowly the sage-brush began to lose its greyness. A deep, soft lavender enveloped it. The sun edged toward the high peaks of the San Gorgonio range; hung poised there for a

moment and then was gone. A new world was born with its passing. Distances doubled in the clearness of the afterglow. Whippoorwills sailed over the sage; the rabbits began to move about. The driver craned his neck to peer into the sky. He knew night would descend soon. At last the speck for which he looked appeared in the sky to the eastward. It came nearer and began to circle widely.

The salesman saw it.

"Hawk, eh, looking for supper," he grinned.

"Ranger plane," said the driver shortly, liking people less the more they talked.

"Ranger plane? Humph! What they lookin' for?"

"Going to take us in to Fremont."

The driver knew what he was in for now and he swung the bus around a curve with dizzy abandon.

"We ain't in no danger, are we?" the man asked nervously. "This bus has never been held up, has it?"

The driver laughed—and he got very few chances to laugh on that run.

"It ain't?" he queried pointedly. "It's been held up four times this month!"

"Just comic-opera stuff," the traveling salesman grinned, to show that he was a regular fellow, too. "No shootin', I mean."

"No?" This with quiet contempt. The bus hit a straight piece of road and the driver pulled up his sleeve and held his arm out for the man to see. A five-inch scar, not two weeks old, where a bullet had ploughed into his forearm met the man's startled gaze.

"My God!" he groaned.

Conversation languished for a few minutes. Several times the driver saw the other lean forward to see if the plane was still above them.

"They ought to fly lower," said he.

"They'll get here in a hurry if we need them," the driver smiled. "Just drop on us like a shot out of hell."

The road began to ascend a low range of hills and the speed of the bus slackened.

"Better step on it," urged the salesman. "Looks like a bad stretch through here."

"We're all right as long as the plane is up

there. They could stick us up all right, but they couldn't get back across the river without being spotted."

The other passengers smiled to themselves at the stranger's perturbation. Even children become used to holdups, and bank money and express packages are impersonal affairs at best.

Suddenly the twilight was gone. The road continued to climb, the drone of the plane could be heard far overhead. The headlights of the bus chiselled a swath through the growing darkness.

For fifty yards the road cut through a defile. Without warning one side of the pass seemed to rise. The earth trembled. Clouds of dust and rock sailed into the air even before the sound of the explosion reached the ears of those in the stage.

"They blew out the wall of the pass!" the driver shouted as he slammed on the brakes. The big bus came to a dizzy halt, the road in front of it choked with earth and boulders.

Out of the blackness came a command.

"Hands up!"

Four or five masked men ran down into the road. One covered the driver. Two others entered the stage, and while one held the passengers at bay, another rifled their pockets.

"Well, where ees eet, *señor?*" a voice demanded of the driver.

"Under the seat!"

"Hand eet out!"

The driver obeyed with alacrity.

Just as the small express-box changed hands, the plane dropped a Veery light. It floated earthward, illuminating the defile and revealing a weird picture of long shadows and gleaming guns. With a deafening roar, the plane shot toward the bus. The bandits hugged it closely, expecting a fusillade of shots, and realizing that their safety lay in remaining so close to the passengers that the rangers would not dare to fire.

Their ruse worked, and the plane shot up again without firing a gun. Like an angry hawk it darted back at them, but again the bandits were under cover.

It was black night by now. The leader of the bandits laughed his satisfaction. He knew the

plane dared not attempt a landing. The river was less than a mile away. Their horses were near at hand. A quick dash, a few minutes to negotiate the river and they would be where the law could not follow them. Truly it was to laugh.

"Those ranger plenty smart," he chuckled, "but the Kinkajou he can be damn smart, too, eh?"

He ordered the loot taken away as he tarried to make his mark on the side of the bus.

"I leave my card for Captain Stewart," he chuckled.

He was play-acting now and trying to impress his victims with his nonchalance. One of his men whispered to him excitedly. He dropped to his knees and held his ear to the ground. He caught the sharp sound of hoof beats.

"Rangers coming!" he said quickly in Spanish. *"Vamoose, amigos!"*

No time for pomp or ceremony now. Without a word they faded into the darkness.

They had been gone but a moment when the driver got down and swept his flashlight along

the side of the bus until it picked up the mark the bandit had made—a crude drawing of a wildcat.

"It was the Kinkajou, all right!" he cursed. "He's got his nerve! Why, we ain't three miles out of town!"

"Kinkajou?" demanded the white-faced salesman who had lost his expense money and a carat-and-a-half diamond.

"Yeh, wildcat! The big spiggoty, I didn't think he had nerve enough to pull anything like this!"

Almost as he finished, three rangers slid off their horses and ran up to the assembled passengers.

"Hello, Captain Stewart," the driver called out. "Got us again! It was the Kinkajou!"

Jim Stewart, the captain of the rangers patrolling the Fremont sector of the border, hadn't been promoted to his present rank by asking useless questions at such moments. He was a thin, wiry man, his face the color of beaten bronze, his eyes screwed up into the shrewd, untroubled desert squint of those who live in the open.

He glanced at the mark the bandit had left. Whatever chagrin he felt at finding himself bested again by the Kinkajou, and matters had come to a pass where some were whispering that Captain Stewart should be removed, found no expression in his handsome face.

"It was him," he said easily. He flashed a glance at the pile of loose dirt and rock that blocked the road. "Get your shovels out," he went on. "Won't take you long to get through. We'll try to cut him off at the river." He turned to his men. "Come on, boys, let's ride!"

They were gone as quickly as they had come.

A good-looking young matron sighed as Stewart disappeared.

"I bet he'll get him, too!" she murmured.

"He would if he had half a chance," the driver answered emphatically. "But what can he do with a handful of men against a hundred miles of thieving, smuggling, bootlegging border?"

All of which was true enough, for at this stage of the year, the Rio Grande was fordable almost anywhere, and there were a thou-

sand arroyos and small canons leading to it that offered the finest sort of cover.

As they rode for the river, one of his men looked to Jim for orders.

"Just leg it," he called back. "It'll be a miracle if we pick him up."

The plane was still flying frantically back and forth. It dropped another light to the left. The rangers bore toward it.

"Makes things look pretty bad for me," Jim muttered to himself as he raced along. "Well, there'll be a showdown some day. This is a tolerably big country, but it isn't big enough for both of us, Kinkajou!"

The Kinkajou and his men knew they were being hotly pursued. But they had the big advantage of knowing just where they were going. Their means of escape had been well thought out, and as they dashed toward the river they gave no thought to the plane overhead trying so desperately to locate them, certain that until they actually reached the Rio Grande they were in no danger of being discovered.

At last they were forced to break cover.

With a concerted rush they sent their horses into the brown water of the sluggish river. The aviators saw them a second later and launched their signal.

Night turned to day as the light floated slowly toward the water.

"Valgame Dios!" the Kinkajou swore. "Those damn light ees bad!"

He ordered his men to draw apart. They understood him instantly and plunged into the dark shadows cast by the willows which choked the river bottom. In a few moments the splashing of their horses died away and they were gone. They had no more than passed when the distant humming of the man's voice broke the stillness. In a few seconds a shadowy figure emerged from the blackness of the brush. As he came toward the American side of the river, sitting his horse in easy fashion, he sang to himself, a lilting Mexican love-song.

He was a young man, not more than twenty-two or three, his features well-cut and hinting more of Spanish blood than Indian. His

clothes were Mexican, as were his saddle and bridle.

He had barely reached the shore when Stewart and his companions dashed up.

"Come now, *amigo,* paw the sky and bring me down a star!" Jim whipped out.

The stranger laughed lightly and raised his hands.

"Now ride up and let us take a look at you," Stewart ordered.

He and his men had guns ready and were secretly congratulating themselves on their luck. Wilkins, a sergeant of long standing in the rangers, hard-boiled and fearless, was nearest the man. An exclamation of mingled surprise and disappointment broke from his lips as he recognized the youth advancing toward him.

"It's Roberto Ferguson!" he ground out.

Jim winced at the information.

"Bring him over here," he exclaimed.

He leaned forward in his saddle and scrutinized the stranger who had walked into their arms.

"So it's you, Roberto!" Jim exclaimed.

"So they say. What's all the excitement?"

"That tone won't get you nothin'!" Wilkins snapped. He turned to Stewart. "Shall I search him, Jim?"

"Wait a minute," Stewart answered. "I don't want to make a mistake."

"Mistake, hell! We got him redhanded, ain't we? I've had my eye on him for a month. We all know that he and his sister are up against it since the old man died. When Rita quit dancing at the Mesa Franceisca where she was dragging down pretty good dough, I wondered how she could afford to quit. I reckon we got the answer right here."

"What do you mean?" Roberto flamed back furiously.

"That you're the Kinkajou! That was a damned clever trick to turn back and ride into us as though you were only taking a little *pasear* into Fremont while your gang went on across the river."

"You're going too fast, Wilkins," Jim protested.

"Fast, nothin'! I guess this is a crack in the face for you all right—I know what you

think about Rita—but facts are facts. You ain't goin' to shut your eyes and let this kid make a monkey of you any longer, are you? You know what the talk is, Jim!"

Stewart's face had lost its pleasantness. His jaw was stern and menacing.

"That's enough," he said softly, but his words were charged with dynamite. "We'll leave Rita out of this. As for me—forget it; I go through with what I start."

Wilkins shrugged his shoulders, surprised and somewhat disconcerted to find he knew Stewart so little after all these years together.

Jim got down out of his saddle and came up to Roberto. Very deftly he ran his hands over the boy, looking for a gun.

"He isn't armed," he muttered aloud.

"That's no surprise," Freeman, one of the other rangers, volunteered. "The Kinkajou is no fool."

Stewart gave no heed to the remark.

"The Laredo-Fremont stage has just been held up, Roberto," he said to the boy.

"I suspected it had," Roberto smiled back, apparently untroubled by the menacing atti-

tude of the rangers. They snorted contemptuously at this.

"It was the Kinkajou," Jim continued. "We chased him right here. We weren't a minute behind him. It looks bad for you, Roberto. What have you got to say?"

"Nothing. I am not the Kinkajou."

"Well, if you're not—you must have seen him pass you."

"Six men on horseback just passed me," Roberto admitted.

The admission stiffened the rangers to redoubled attention.

"You recognized them?"

"No, *señor,*" Roberto smiled. "When one lives in Mexico—and has any thought of continuing to live there—there are many things that one does not see. The Kinkajou for instance."

"But you did recognize him, eh?" Jim shot out quickly.

Roberto was not caught off guard. He shook his head slowly.

"I did *not,*" said he.

Jim was fast losing patience, although he would have given his right arm to have removed Roberto from suspicion of being the bandit.

"Make him talk," Wilkins swore contemptuously. "What was he doing here?"

"That's a fair question," Jim echoed. "What's the answer, Roberto?"

"I was going into Fremont."

"There's easier and shorter ways of doing that," Stewart remarked pointedly.

"Well, you call this a free country. I go to Fremont my own way." He paused to fasten his attention on Wilkins. "Next time I come over maybe I better ask Wilkins how to come, eh?"

"Maybe you'll have to," Wilkins warned.

Roberto just smiled inscrutably.

The boy's exasperating suavity had completely convinced the rangers that Roberto was guilty of the robbery. Indeed, Jim Stewart could not escape the feeling that Rita's brother was the long-sought Kinkajou. And yet, he knew that he had little or nothing to arrest him on.

"Put down your hands," he said without

warning. "The bus is still there. Maybe the driver or the passengers will identify him."

He motioned the others to follow and turned his mount back toward the road.

Roberto lit a cigarette and puffed it unconcernedly. Wilkins pulled his horse over so that he rode beside Captain Stewart.

"Nothin' personal in what I said, Jim," he said softly that the others might not hear.

"I know it," Jim answered and nodded.

"You'll take him into town and give him the works, won't you?"

"And if we do—he'll wiggle out of it, go scot free and be twice as careful in the future that we don't get our hands on him. I don't want to lose him that way. If they can't identify him, I'm going to let him go. That'll make him cocky and he'll be ready for another job. We'll get him good if he does."

Neither the driver nor the passengers could identify the lad as one of the gang that had held them up.

"All right, you win, Roberto," Jim told him. "You're free to go. But get this for future reference—it's me or the Kinkajou—I get him, or he gets me!"

CHAPTER II

BESIDE THE RIO GRANDE

FREMONT, Texas, was a daisy. It was also a gem and a pippin—a red-hot tamale and a lot of chili con carne poured out of a tabasco bottle. And it was the capital of a little land of its own where the Eighteenth Amendment was very unpopular, not to say disliked. It was wide open, hard cash and at least half as wicked as it liked to think it was.

Viewed by moonlight, Fremont was only a little Mexican hamlet of old shadows, soft voices and enticing eyes. By day it was something else again. One either had money to spend, borrowed it from friends or moved away.

Across the river was San Luca. There lay escape from almost anything the tired business man suffers with. Not that Fremont did not have certain avenues of escape all its own.

Certain citizens managed to exist on the unearned increment of certain shadowy, rather nebulous, transactions that were wary of scrutiny. Countless others pursued professions and prospered, although their assets were as intangible as their labors. And then, there were those who held secrecy a sin. Everyone in Fremont knew that Chick Bean was a bootlegger, and yet Chick moved in the best circles, either with or without his wares as the occasion and company demanded.

Ed Lovett, the lawyer, had starved in Dallas, Texas, until he considered the profits to be made out of Mexican divorces. He had forthwith hied himself to Fremont and pursued his calling with the avidity and high-pressure enthusiasm of an ambulance chaser. He and Chick had much in common. Customers, principally. But it was not an unusual sight to see them in the office of the Fremont National Bank, discussing business with the president of that up-and-coming institution, in which both were well-known depositors. All of which is of interest only in so far as it was

indicative of the little bonanza town on the banks of the Rio Grande.

If Fremont was not cosmopolitan, it liked to think it was, and two days after the last robbery of the Laredo stage the matter was a forgotten one in the public mind. A new gusher had blown in north of town. That was of far greater importance. It meant new money, more work and another boom for Fremont, and as the crowd gathered that evening in the Casa Palomar, the brightest star in Fremont's night-life, where Dolly Gray and her Ziegfeld Girls (Dolly was no piker) were the talk of the town, the conversation ran to speculation on how much the new well would "do."

It was a big night in the Casa Palomar. General Romero Joselito Esteban, the feudal lord of San Luca, across the river, had deigned to grace the cabaret with his company, although his own Club Esteban, aboard a barge anchored on the Mexican side of the river, put it to shame for the splendor of its entertainment and its multitudinous devices

for extracting good American dollars from the paying customers.

His presence had created quite a stir behind the scenes as well as out front.

"So that's the big butter and egg man from old Mex?" Dolly queried as she gazed at the florid faced General about whom the proprietor was hovering solicitously. "What revolution did he start?"

"You're talking arithmetic now," one of the girls answered. "Maybe if we're good little girls he'll throw a party."

"Lay off of him," Dolly warned. "The next revolution will make a tamale peddler out of him, like as not. I know his kind—here today and gone tomorrow. Give me something stable, like a broker or a bootlegger."

The girls went through their numbers with unusual pep and gave General Esteban the spotlight, but there were no signs of impending whoopee stirring within his breast this evening. In fact, after Dolly's next solo, he paid his check and left.

He had been gone but a minute when Sergeant Wilkins and Trooper McGinn of the

Rangers came in. They caught the eye of the proprietor and called him aside.

"Will it be O. K. to put up some of these?" Wilkins asked, displaying a poster offering a reward of ten thousand dollars for the arrest, dead or alive, of the Kinkajou.

The bead-like eyes of Pancho Rodriguez, the proprietor of the Casa Palomar, widened as he read the printed reward from top to bottom.

"Sure!" he exclaimed at last. "Stick 'em up if it will help you boys to catch the Kinkajou. Put 'em all over the place!"

"Thanks—but it'll take a lot more than these to land that bandit," Wilkins answered.

"Well, you know—the wildcat! He is hard to catch," Rodriguez laughed. It was a mirthless laugh, and he watched the two rangers out of the corner of his eyes as they moved away.

Wilkins and McGinn knew most of those assembled, and in Fremont as in New York it was considered smart to "know" the police.

"What you got there, Dick?" a man asked Wilkins.

For answer, Wilkins flipped one of the posters down on the table.

" 'Bout time a reward was posted," some one exclaimed.

A little flutter of interest ran over the crowd as the news spread. McGinn and Wilkins tacked up three or four of the posters and were on their way out when Wilkins came face to face with Roberto Ferguson, seated alone at a small side table.

"Well, there's the kid himself," Wilkins laughed sarcastically, still carrying his grudge. "Here's a valentine for you!"

Roberto's eyes narrowed and flamed at the open insult. Wilkins, quick to see that he had reached the boy, pushed the notice across the table at him. Roberto made no attempt to read it.

"You see what it says, don't you?" the ranger persisted.

Roberto pushed it away. Wilkins was not to be put off, and as Roberto lit a cigarette he shoved the paper at him again. Their eyes locked. Roberto was not to be cowed. Deliberately he held his match to the notice.

"Come on Dick, don't lose your head," McGinn warned his brother officer. His hand flashed out and the burning paper was snuffed out.

"I ought to arrest you for that," Wilkins muttered. "It's against the law to destroy a reward notice."

"Let it go," McGinn argued.

"O. K. But I won't forget it."

"Neither will I," Roberto answered softly.

The two officers passed on. Ten steps away Wilkins whirled for a backward glance at the boy. Roberto was watching him.

"I'll keep an eye on you, kid," Wilkins muttered to himself. To McGinn he added, "We'd better tell Stewart the kid's in town."

"Yep," the taciturn McGinn answered.

As the two rangers were leaving they encountered Chick Bean, well-known Fremont bootlegger. Chick was so intently watching the performance that he failed to notice the two officers at first. As the number ended, he drew back to find himself facing Wilkins and McGinn. Without thinking, he unconsciously raised his hands above his head.

The officers laughed.

"Put 'em down, Chick," Wilkins grinned. "We ain't lookin' for bootleggers tonight."

With a sigh of evident relief, Chick dropped his hand.

"You sorta took my breath away, boys," Chick grinned sheepishly as he mopped his brow.

Suddenly, with breathless insistence, Ed Lovett, the lawyer, dashed up to them, his eyes and lips popping questions.

"What's the matter? What is it? What's wrong?" he gasped.

"Nothin' much, Mr. Lovett," Wilkins grinned. "Not after Chick."

Ed's eyes scanned the reward notice.

"Oh, after the Kinkajou!" he exclaimed disappointedly.

"Yeh, and the way he keeps dodging arrest he must be a client of yours."

"No," Lovett laughed. "But if you catch him, boys—I'll defend him."

"You may get the chance," Wilkins replied meaningly as he darted a glance back at Roberto. "I reckon we'll have him soon."

When they had left, Lovett drew a telegram out of his pocket. Dolly and her "Ziegfeld Girls" were just finishing another number. Chick's eyes and attention were riveted on Dolly. As the girls trooped off the platform, Lovett tapped Chick on the shoulder and pulled out a chair to sit down beside him. He had an air of importance about him, a trick he had long ago learned was of incalculable value when one had news to impart.

"Well?" Chick queried. Ed waited for the applause to die away.

"Chick, I'm loaded down with good news!" he began.

Dolly came back for an encore. Chick applauded her madly.

"There's my good news!" he exclaimed jubilantly. "She's some baby! She's wonderful, ain't she Ed? I'm crazy about her!"

Dolly flashed him a gorgeous smile and stepped down from the stage and moved toward his table as the encore ended.

"Some mama, all right," Ed murmured tersely.

"Hello, Chickie!" Dolly purred as she joined them at the table.

"Sit down, baby," Chick pleaded.

"Can't kid, I gotta change for the next number. See you later." She included Lovett in her departing smile and was gone.

Chick stared after her.

"Ain't she class, Ed? She's got Broadway stamped all over her. She's sure some baby!"

"And she can be *your* baby from now on," Lovett informed him and gave him a shrewd wink.

"What do you mean?"

"Take a look at this!"

Ed handed the telegram to Chick and the latter scanned it eagerly. A broad smile crossed his face as its import began to register on his consciousness.

"Is that on the level, Ed?" he gasped.

"Absolutely! Just another triumph for the best little ole lawyer on the Rio Grande," Lovett beamed. "The Mexican courts have granted you a divorce from the present Mrs. Bean."

Chick's smile faded and he began to grow sceptical.

"What's the matter? You don't seem pleased," Lovett queried.

"Say, will anybody outside of Mexico believe that divorce. Those things ain't legal, are they?"

"They ain't? Since when?"

"All right, Ed, Dolly and me'll be married tomorrow and——"

"And get married in Mexico! When they tie the knot over there it's a slipknot—just in case Dolly don't happen to be the hotsy-totsy you think she is."

"You're crazy, no chance of that!" Chick exclaimed belligerently. "I'm set this time! But Mexico is all right with me. We'll spend our honeymoon over there, in the land of the free. You make arrangements for us at the Mesa Franceisca. I'll put it on right for the little lady."

Lovett discussed the details of the wedding hurriedly and was about to leave when the curtains parted and Dolly walked out upon

the stage clad in an abbreviated bandit's costume.

"Ain't she a picture?" the love-sick Chick sighed.

"This is something new," Lovett whispered as Dolly held up her hand for attention.

"Ladies and gentlemen, there's been so much talk about this Kinkajou that I thought it was time we had a song about him. So keep your hands on your pocketbooks and watch out!"

The audience was interested immediately and as the lights dimmed and the orchestra began to vamp the new number, Chick leaned over to Lovett.

"Tell me that kid hasn't got brains," he beamed. "Made this song up all herself."

Even Rodriguez, the proprietor, paused to listen, and in the general interest in Dolly and the girls, no one in the Casa Palomar chanced to see the stalwart figure, clad in chaps and the costume of a vaquero, who edged into an open doorway just in back of the table where Roberto was interestedly waiting for the new song to begin.

Noiselessly, without attracting his attention, the man slipped inside and leaned against a round pillar just behind the boy. This talk of the Kinkajou seemed to interest and amuse him. His grin broadened as Dolly and her girls marched out and sang the new number. He failed to applaud, but there was frank approval as they sang the chorus a second time:

"When you do the Kinkajou
You'll dance before you think you do
You clown around, you're feeling oh, so lazy,
Before you know you're shouting 'Whoopsee-Daisie'
First you feel a kink or two
But here's the kick for you
Your one desire is to acquire
Each movement of this dainty dance
'Twill thrill you through.
Oh! I know it will entrance you
When you do the Kinkajou."

Needless to say the timeliness of the song won it instant popularity.

"Come on, dance!" Rodriguez urged.

The man hiding behind the pillar covertly watched Roberto. The lad was nervous and patently ill at ease. He glanced around the cafe from time to time and repeatedly stole a furtive look at the clock over the cashier's desk. He pinched out his cigarette at last, and as the music struck up a new tune, slipped out as though anxious not to be seen.

The man behind the pillar watched him go. The attention of the crowd was elsewhere. He waited until Roberto had left, and then, stealthily as the boy himself, he slipped out into the almost deserted street. As he did, he pulled his neckerchief up over the lower part of his face.

"That song ought to be a hit after to-night," he murmured to himself.

The man was Captain Jim Stewart of the Rangers.

CHAPTER III

EASY PICKING

It was almost midnight. Down the street three or four night hawk restaurants and tamale parlors blazed with light. Near the Casa Palomar thirty to forty automobiles were parked, but in the block beyond, facing the Fremont National Bank, the street was deserted. In an alley between the Lone Star Dry Goods Emporium and Weinstein's Shoe Store a man on horseback held at close rein three saddled ponies. His attention was riveted on the bank.

He saw Roberto leave the Casa Palomar, and as the boy came up on the street opposite him he drew further back into shadows. When Stewart slipped out after Roberto and melted into the darkness between the cafe and the building next door to it, the man on horseback grunted uneasily and fingered his gun.

Long, anxious minutes passed. A rattle-trap flivver floundered down the street, shattering the stillness of the night and drowning out the strains of music from the Casa Palomar.

"Madre de Dios," the man on horseback cursed. *"Virgen santisima! que te pasa?"*

Again silence descended. Far down the street the waiting horseman saw a face peer around the corner of a building. It was Stewart. The man could not recognize him at the distance, but he knew no one should have been there at this hour. When he glanced back to pick up Roberto with his shifty eyes the boy had disappeared.

A second later he thought he saw Roberto at the corner of the bank.

He blinked his eyes and looked again. The boy was not there. The man's horse threw up his head nervously. He kicked the animal and cursed volubly to himself. With a nervous swipe of his arm he brushed the perspiration from his forehead.

Things began to happen then with awful quickness. A masked man came to the door of the bank, opened it and held up his hand

as a signal. Stewart was near. He saw the man and ducked back into the shadows just in time.

Inside the bank a ragged flash as though lightning were played over the face of the vault illuminated the room for a split second. A deep reverberating explosion followed. White smoke rolled through the open doorway. The man on horseback sent his spurs into his mount and flashed across the street to the door of the bank.

Men ran out—all masked. They carried two small canvas bags.

"Quick! *Muy pronto companeros!*" the leader of the bandit gang whipped out.

They were on their horses in an instant. Down the alley, in which the horses had waited, they flashed. As they disappeared into the black cavern of the alley a shot rang out. Then another and another, but they were gone.

In the Casa Palomar the show stopped with a bang. Men and women ran to the doors and windows.

"It's the Kinkajou!" a woman's shrill voice screamed.

"He's cracked the bank!" Lovett yelled. "The dirty rat!"

Men pushed women companions out of the way. Most of them were armed. They moved across the street and converged on the bank, from which the smoke still poured.

"Where was the Rangers?" some one demanded.

"How much did they get?" another cried.

In a corner of the cabaret Dolly hung on the Chick, unconscious of the fact that Chick had interposed her body between himself and any possible stray shots.

"Don't go out, Chickie!" she pleaded. "Please, honey——"

"Let me go, Dolly, I'll get him—the—the ——" Chick thundered, feeling sure the bandits had made good their get-away.

"No, no, Chick—what would Dolly do without her Chickie?"

Chick gulped. The light in Dolly's eyes made him weak in the knees.

"W-w-w-will you marry me, honey?" he gasped.

"Will I?" Dolly exclaimed and hugged him

desperately. "I knew it would take a catastrophe to bring us together."

An official of the bank pushed his way through the crowd that had congregated in front of it.

"The rangers must be asleep on their job!" he stormed angrily. "There'll be a shake-up now!"

Stewart, apparently forgetful of the fact that his face was masked, poked his head around a building to hear what was being said. Some one saw him.

"There he is, the Kinkajou!" he yelled.

The crowd whirled on Stewart.

"There he is! That's him!" a dozen voices shouted in unison.

A shot sounded. Stewart knew it was too late to explain, that he would be shot down in his tracks if he stood there a second longer.

With uncanny swiftness he leaped backward between the buildings, whistling for his horse as he ran. He leaped into his saddle on the dead run. His pursuers were just in back of him. Half a dozen shots kicked up the dust around him.

"A clean get-away again!" a voice ground out. It was Sergeant Wilkins. He jumped upon the running-board of a car. "Come on, step on it!" he yelled at the owner. "He'll cross the river while we stand here gabbing!"

The car raced away and the crowd scurried back to the bank where the officials had found the main vault looted. McGinn, of the Rangers, was being harangued by the President of the institution.

"You fellows are so busy running around tacking up reward notices that that greaser can come in here and blow up our bank right under your noses and get away without a scratch!"

"I've sent for Captain Stewart," McGinn answered sullenly. "Maybe it wasn't the Kinkajou."

"Don't kid yourself," Ed Lovett glared at him. "Look at this!" and he pointed out the Kinkajou's sign on the window.

"And don't bother Captain Stewart," the banker cut in. "He's been trying to land him for three months—and what's he done? Nothing! We're covered all right, but I'm telling

you the Bankers' Association is fed up with Captain Stewart's rosy promises. We want action—and we're going to get it. Stewart will either get the Kinkajou or the Rangers will get a new captain. You can report that to him, if you want to!"

Back in the Casa Palomar the oily Rodriguez urged his musicians to play. "The bank don't belong to me," he muttered. "Play that new song of Dolly's—that Kinkajou song. That ought to be pretty good now."

The orchestra struck up the tune and went through the vamp three or four times.

"Where's Dolly?" Rodriguez shouted. "Dolly! Dolly!"

"What is it, a fire?" Dolly demanded as she crossed the floor toward him.

"Come on, sing! We ain't closing up yet. What do I pay you for?"

"I don't know, Caruso," Dolly retorted airily, "but the singing is off. I'm through—quit—or, in the classical Greek, all washed up!"

"What?" Rodriguez roared. Dolly laughed at him. Rodriguez changed his tactics with

surprising haste. His anger melted to honeyed words as he remembered that Dolly had packed his place. "Well of course I let you off tonight maybe. Dolly," he purred. "You come a little early tomorrow night, eh?"

"Say, don't you savvy my talk?" Dolly demanded hotly. "I told you I was through with this joint! I'm going to get married. By this time tomorrow night I'll be Mrs. Chick Bean! Laugh that off, you big boloney!"

"*Virgen santa!*" Rodriguez gasped as he slumped down into a chair. "*Dios los cria y ellos se juntan! Caramba!*"

CHAPTER IV

RIO RITA

It was a clean, blue and white morning. Fleecy cloudlets sailed high across the sun-splashed dome of the universe. San Luca's brown hills and valleys drowsed in the still cool and invigorating air that the Gulf breeze had brought inland the night before.

In the lush bottom-land of the Rio Grande, cattle stood knee-deep in the brown water, loath to leave for the hills where the heat waves would soon begin their spectral dance.

Beyond a bend in the river the stately heads of a clump of Eucalyptus trees spoke of shade and rest. They marked the site of the old Ferguson rancho. A cluster of adobe buildings and the ranch-house itself were grouped about the trees.

In its day the rancho had echoed the prosperity of its owner; but bad times had come

to the Rancho Ferguson long before John Ferguson had passed away and left the place to Rita and Roberto. Neighbors often traced its decadence to the death of the first Rita Ferguson. Ferguson, a Texan, had married her as a young girl and devoted his life to her. With her passing, not even his great love for his children had seemed to win from him the toil and ambition to prosper, and to succeed, both were necessary in generous measure in San Luca.

Pancho Villa had held the reins over northern Mexico in those days of prosperity. John Ferguson and Pancho had pulled together, but with the passing of Villa things had gone from bad to worse with each revolution and had reached a climax with the advent of General Esteban.

And yet, for all its run-down appearance, the old rancho had not lost its charm. There is something beautiful about crumbling adobe when the geraniums and oleanders run riot over it. The patio of the Rancho Ferguson was no exception to the rule. There the flowers, watered by a cleverly contrived ir-

rigation ditch, blossomed in gorgeous profusion. From the patio itself it was but a step to the river.

This morning, as the bees hummed about the geraniums and hollyhocks a face appeared above the patio wall. The eyes were eager and they swept the patio with a quick, appraising glance.

It was Jim! About him there was the look of the fugitive. With the agility of a cat he vaulted the wall and dropped down in the comparative shelter of the flowers and vines that covered it.

From the direction of the river a fragment of a song sung in Spanish, reached his ears. He smiled to himself as he recognized Rita's voice.

A few moments later he caught a flash of her bright-colored dress. Her song was the unconscious singing of one who wanders aimlessly at ease amid loved and familiar scenes. Several times it stopped as she paused to give attention to some favorite plant or flower.

At last she came down the old, crumbling steps that led into the patio proper.

"I can hear you calling,
Like the waters falling
I hear your song——"

The song stopped short again and she raised her voice and called to Pedro and old Timoteo, her peon servitors.

"*Que to pasa, Pedro?* There is no water this morning."

The two peons took a glance at the ditch to satisfy themselves that it was dry. They immediately began to blame each other. Rita smiled, and as they hurried away to remedy the trouble, she picked up her song again:

"Each wave caressing
Finds my heart confessing
I will love you, love you,
Sweetheart, all life long."

Jim Stewart stood transfixed as he gazed on her, so beautiful and so unconscious of his presence. He found her so utterably desirable that for a moment his emotions ran away with

him and he was on the point of stepping out of hiding and confronting her.

There was something about her exotic beauty that almost smothered him. There was vitality and life in the easy swing of her body, in the deep full-bosomed grace of her. Fire slumbered in her dark eyes—eyes that caught one up and held you entranced.

Her mother, a true Spaniard, had been once the toast of San Luca, her beauty famous from Laredo to Brownsville. But those who had known the other Rita found her daughter even more lovely.

A little shrine, that had been erected when the rancho was first built, still stood in the patio. Rita crossed herself and dropped to her knees before it, her eyes closed.

Stewart bowed his head as he caught the murmur of her prayer. He sighed so loud as she got to her feet that Rita cast an anxious look about her, not sure whether her ears were playing her tricks or not.

She listened, and all was still, save for the humming of the bees and the soft cooing of the

doves in the Eucalyptus trees. Smiling at herself, she picked up her song once more:

"A dream with all its charms came true.
All life began anew——
Oh, happy river of my dreams,
Go ripple on so free,
Oh, echo this for me——"

The song stopped short. She heard a furiously driven horse pound across the wooden bridge over the now unused *'cequia madre,* the mother-ditch. The next moment Roberto flashed through the patio gate and slid from his saddle. Without waiting to speak to his sister, the boy pulled off the saddle and bridle from his mount and slapping the horse on the rump sent him scurrying toward the pasture. With his next motion he tossed the bridle and saddle into a corner and straightening up, swept the patio with a keen glance of relief.

"Roberto!" Rita cried, "where have you been? What is the matter?"

It was not like him to return in this fashion. His nervousness was plainly apparent.

"Ssh!" the boy cautioned. "Where are Timoteo and Pedro?"

"At the river. Why do you ask? Tell me?" Rita begged with growing excitement.

"Margarita is in the kitchen, eh?"

"Yes! But why——"

"We're alone, then—there's no one else here?" Roberto interrupted insistently.

"But of course we are alone, Roberto!" Rita exclaimed. "But your clothes—they are covered with dust! Your horse was wet! What does——"

"Wait! Has anyone been here looking for me?"

"No! What is the matter? Why do you ask these absurd questions? Tell me—where have you been?"

Roberto cast his eyes around the patio before replying.

"Listen, little sister," he whispered, "the bank in Fremont was robbed last night."

Rita's face blanched, not so much at the news but that it should so concern her brother. She watched him with narrowed eyes.

"I was in the Casa Palomar. I'd had just

stepped outside when the bank was blown up."

"Well?" Rita prompted. "How does this concern us?"

"You know the trouble I had over the robbery of the bus. The Rangers have been watching me. They saw me there last night. Two minutes after I leave, the bank is robbed. I got away in a hurry. I was followed. I tell you it looks bad for me."

Stewart risked being discovered to move nearer. It was vital to him and his plans that he hear what Roberto had to say. Just as he succeeded in getting within earshot the distant drumming of the horses' hoofs struck him.

Through a crack in the crumbling patio wall he looked out and saw a band of horsemen riding toward the rancho. They were not less than fifteen in number. A second later he recognized the leader of the party. It was General Esteban.

This was an unlooked for happening. Jim found himself caught between two fires, and yet exactly where he wanted to be if he could escape detection.

Neither Rita nor Roberto were yet aware of the oncoming riders.

"I had to get away," Jim heard Roberto say.

"But where have you been ever since?"

"I didn't want them to think I'd come here," Roberto replied. "I wanted them to believe I had——"

The words died in his throat as he caught the sound of the drumming hoofs.

"But where were you, Roberto?" Rita insisted. "Why don't you answer? Is it possible my brother is—Roberto!" she finished with a gasp, aware now that men were coming.

Roberto stopped her with a quick gesture and ran to the gate. With trembling hands Rita watched. A glance sufficed to inform him who it was that came at such speed. They were only a few yards off.

"It is General Esteban!" Roberto groaned. "Don't tell him a thing ! If he asks for me—say you haven't seen me—that I haven't been home."

"But Roberto——"

Roberto did not tarry to hear her out. He

sprang across the patio and disappeared into the house.

Rita fought desperately to pull herself together. She could hear Esteban and his men dismounting. There was some sort of argument going on among his men. She heard Esteban laugh, and it was a laugh to rock the rafters.

"*Hola! muchachos!*" he bellowed. "*No hay mal que dure cien anos ni cuerpo que lo resista!* It is enough! Come!"

The argument ended, but Gonzales, Esteban's lieutenant, flashed a glance of hatred at his superior's back. There were times, he decided, when the General was decidely not Mexican.

An order was given to let no one leave the rancho. The guards saluted as he passed, spurs, chains jingling and his absurd sword clanking over the flagging. What his command lacked in uniforms they made up in the fierceness of their countenances and the quantity of ammunition they carried slung over their shoulders in double belts.

Their appearance did not add to Stewart's

worries. To him, they were familiar faces. He smiled to himself as he saw Rita gird herself for the encounter with General Esteban.

"She's a thoroughbred," he murmured to himself as he heard her start to sing, evidently hoping to give the impression that nothing was amiss and that she was quite unaware of Esteban's arrival.

The General stopped in the gateway and let his greedy eyes run over her figure. In the days when she had sung at the Mesa Franceisca, he had come under her spell, and as he leaned impudently against the patio wall and drank in her beauty again he told himself that he had made no mistake; there was no one in Mexico to compare with her.

He bit off the end of a cigar and lighted it with extravagant ease. He chuckled to himself as he puffed on it.

"*Mi corazon palpita por ti; no oyes, Rita?*" he laughed. "You ain't deah, huh?"

"Oh, General Esteban!" Rita beamed and bowed to him. "When did you come?"

"Oh, me? I been here a long time. I listen to you sing. You have the voice of an angel,

Señorita. I don't say so much for your temper."

Rita laughed. Out of the corner of her eye she counted his followers. He didn't often come with a pack like that at his back.

"You honor me, General," she smiled bravely.

"Is it?" Esteban smiled. "Maybe it don't mean nothing. You're not surprised to see me so quick, eh?"

"Why, no, General. You are always——"

"Then why is that lovely vein in your neck flutter so?" he asked as he came over to her.

"I don't know—pleasure, perhaps, at seeing you——"

Rita dropped her eyes. She didn't mean to be coquettish, but Esteban sighed passionately and caught her hand.

"Ah, you are wonderful, Rita!" he whispered. "You'd make a palace out of my hacienda!"

Rita shook her head prettily.

"No, General! I'm afraid too many ladies have done that already."

Esteban tossed away his cigar.

"You bet my life you have only to nod your pretty head and *caramba*—out they go!" He bent over and tickled her chin. "What you say, Rita?"

"Thanks for the honor, General," she sighed teasingly. "But it is too early in the morning."

Esteban's good-humor was not proof against this affront to his dignity. His mouth hardened and there was a nasty whine in his voice as he said: "Mebbe it's not too early to tell me where your brother is——"

Rita was ready for him with an aggravating smile.

"Oh, so you do not come to see me, General. I am so desolated."

Esteban rode roughshod over her answer.

"What time did he leave here last night?" he demanded sharply.

"I don't know. Roberto does as he pleases."

"So? Mebbe you know what time he came home, eh?"

"I tell you I don't know. It's none of your business," she flamed at him.

"No? Mebbe I make eet my business! You forget who I am, I guess."

"I know who you are all right. My brother and I don't owe you anything. We don't bother you—so don't bother us!"

Several of Esteban's men laughed at Rita's angry retort. They liked temper in a woman. Esteban himself was rather amused, too.

"*No hay rosa sin espinas,*" he flung over his shoulder at his men. They laughed together. The rose without a thorn would not have interested them for long. To Rita he added:

"What eyes you have when you are angry, *querida!*"

"Never mind about my eyes," Rita snapped at him. "Get out of here!"

This was occasion for a genuine laugh. General Esteban was not in the habit of being put out before it pleased him to go. He took a confidential tone with the infuriated girl.

"Mebbe you don't know the bank in Fremont was robbed last night."

He watched her closely to see if his information brought any sense of surprise. Rita

was at the point of answering sarcastically. Stewart, peering at her from his hiding place, prayed that she might not fall into General Esteban's trap.

"Robbed?" she cried at last, and she gave the exclamation an air of surprise that satisfied even Jim.

Esteban lit a fresh cigar to cover his chagrin.

"Roberto was seen in Fremont last night," he began again. "Perhaps you don't know that——" He stopped short as Gonzales rushed up to him and told him they had just found Roberto's foam-flecked horse.

Rita's face fell as she heard the man out. Stewart sighed, too, and felt for his gun. Esteban lowered his voice and gave Gonzales an order of some kind, for Gonzales nodded and left at once.

General Esteban then directed his attention to Rita. He gave her a venomous look, and waited for her to drop her eyes or show in some way that she feared him. In this he was disappointed.

"So you lied to me!" he growled at last. "You knew the bank had been robbed. I guess

you know about Roberto, too. Mebbe I teach you a lesson, little one. You think because you are beautiful—because I love you—that you can make a fool out of me, eh? *Madre de Dios!* I show you! Where is Roberto?"

"I do not know where he is or what he has been doing," she answered flatly. "I can't tell you anything!"

"No? Well, I could tell you plenty if I wanted to. Mebbe somethings even you don't know."

At this juncture, Gonzales came back. He had been searching the house.

"I can't find him," he reported. "I get this, though," and he gave General Esteban a note Roberto had left.

"I thought he had been here," Esteban grinned evilly. Then to Rita, "Here is a note your brother left for you."

Rita reached out to take it, but he snatched it away.

"I read it first," he muttered.

"I hate you!" Rita glared.

Esteban only smiled.

"He is going to the Mesa Franceisca," he

announced as though the information was not displeasing to him. "I go, too!"

He handed the note to Rita. She glanced at it hurriedly.

"You're not going to do anything to him!" she declared. "You dare not——"

"No? That's up to you—as those damn Gringo say."

"What do you mean?" Rita demanded sharply.

"You know me! What I say goes in San Luca. I don't care how many Gringo banks are robbed. If you're nice to me—I can forget a lot and be nice to Roberto." Esteban began to melt to good-will as he saw Rita hesitate over the answer. "What do you say, *querida mia?*"

"But I don't love you," she protested.

"*Por Dios,* do I ask you to love me? I make you do that! When I want anytheeng—I take it! Ask the Mexicans—ask the Gringos! What I am not given—I take! Suppose I take you now, eh?"

He caught Rita around the waist and drew her into his arms.

"One little kiss, Rita?"

"Stop or I'll scream," she cried as she tried to fight her way out of his arms.

"And who will hear if you do?" he laughed.

"Your men——"

"Oh, all right. I'm a gentleman. I'll send them away." He turned to Gonzales and ordered him to start for the Mesa Franceisca. He waited until sound of their noisy departure died away. "Now I have that kiss," he said eagerly. *Que loco soy!* I am crazy for you!"

Rita tried to push him away. As he glanced over his shoulder she saw Stewart emerge from the shrubbery. Not knowing what fresh disaster impended, she stiffened and the note fell from her hand. Esteban sensed that something was wrong. He straightened up and found Jim's eyes boring into his.

CHAPTER V

IN A MEXICAN GARDEN

RITA stared at Jim as though she were looking at an apparition. How long had he been there? There was something vaguely familiar about his face. In the time that she had been employed at the Mesa Franceisca she had met many strangers. Countless hundreds had admired her from the other side of the footlights.

Stewart, whose visits to Mexico were always unofficial or incognito, was one of the latter. Sergeant Wilkins had even dared to suggest once that Jim invented excuses to go to San Luca that he might see Rita. It would have been an easy matter for him to have been introduced to her on any one of a dozen different occasions. But Stewart was wise in the ways of men and women, especially in such places as the Mesa Franceisca. He knew the path that most of the girls took who were in favor

there. It was only because Rita meant so much to him that he stayed away from her, certain that if she was what he thought her that she would soon tire of the glamor and cheap glitter of the place.

He had been overjoyed to hear that she had left the Mesa Franceisca. It was while he was trying to invent a reason for coming to the Rancho that the Kinkajou had crossed the line and left his trail of robberies and holdups. And strange enough, instead of keeping him away, that trail had led him directly to Rita's garden.

He did not underestimate General Esteban's power in San Luca. He knew the man was ruthless in his hates, that in confronting him as he was that he made a marked man of himself. And yet, Stewart smiled as he stepped forth from his concealment.

"Is this shopworn Romeo annoying you?" he asked in velvety tones.

Esteban's face flamed with rage.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

Jim ignored him. "I asked you a question, *Señorita?*" said he.

General Esteban was not to be pushed aside in this fashion.

"Do you know who I am?" he thundered.

"Sure I know who you are," Jim answered with open contempt. "But I don't believe this lady does or she'd ask me to throw you out of her garden."

General Esteban was beside himself. He ran to the gate and glanced at his men, now a mile away. A shot would hardly bring them back.

"Believe me, you don't know who I am or you wouldn't talk to me like that," he cried. I am——"

"I know who you am—and if you don't get out of here *pronto* I'll spank you with your own sword, Mr.——"

"General Esteban to you Gringos!" the General chortled. "I'm what you American call a damn good hater. I hate a Gringo, and I hate meddlers—but never before have I the pleasure to have both of those hates rolled into one."

"Well, I've done you a favor, then," Jim mocked him.

"*Si!* And now I do you one, *Señor!* Get out of San Luca before sunset!"

"I'm sorry, General," Stewart answered without a moment's hesitation. "But I think I'm going to like San Luca at sunset. The climate just suits me."

"That's up to you, *Señor.* Mebbe you find the climate is changed this evening."

"Not enough to make me change my mind," laughed Jim.

"Think it over, Gringo," General Esteban snarled. "I got plenty men who can shoot straight. *Hasta la vista, Señorita!* And don't forget, Gringo, I got plenty men——"

Jim nodded and waited for him to go. The General tried to slay him with a glance, but finding those unwavering eyes still on him, he took his leave.

"He and his men," Jim muttered. "Sounds like a chess player!"

Rita had watched the two men breathlessly and as Jim turned to her now he surprised a look of deep concern in her eyes. He smiled, and there was such frank friendliness in it that she warmed to him instantly. She real-

ized that he was handsome. He had proved his courage in defending her against General Esteban. But even in San Luca strangers could not pop up with impugnity in one's garden. Certainly an explanation was due her.

Jim sensed the question forming in her eyes, but he refused to speak.

"Who are you?" she demanded, trying to make her tone sound severe.

"Jim."

"Humph! Jim, eh? I don't know any Jims. Jim what?"

Stewart managed to keep his face straight.

"Just Jim!" said he. "And now that I've told you all about myself—maybe you can explain——"

"I'm Rita Fer——" She began, a broad smile parting her lips. Jim cut her off short.

"Don't tell me," he pleaded, "because then I might have to call you something other than just Rita."

"You are full of jokes, you American, but you say very nice things, *Señor,*" Rita trilled. "You—you like that Rita, eh?"

"I have for a long time—ever since I knew it belonged to you."

Rita sighed luxuriously. Truly there was nothing slow about this *señor*.

"But you have never seen me before," she protested.

"Oh, yes I have, many times from over there," and Jim pointed to the American side of the river. "I've often watched you. I remember you at the Mesa Franceisca, too."

A shade of annoyance passed over her face at the mention of the place.

"You say you have watched me, *Señor?* Will you tell me why?"

"Some day I'll tell you—I hope," Jim murmured, his blood tingling.

Rita grew serious and her manner changed.

"I am glad you were watching today," said she. "I—I am afraid, Mr. Jim."

"Afraid? Afraid of that bull fighter?"

"It is easy enough to laugh, but he does as he pleases in San Luca. Defy him and he will make you obey."

"He can't make you love him, Rita—can

he?" Jim asked anxiously. She shook her head determinedly.

"No, he could never do that," she mused.

"You seem very certain of that, Rita," Jim said softly. "I wonder why."

Rita stooped and picked a blossom. She tossed it at him teasingly.

"Maybe some day I will tell you, Mr. Jim. But come, let me make you a cup of chocolate. There is a table in the corner of the patio."

Entranced, Stewart allowed himself to be led into the cool and quiet patio.

"I shall make it myself, Mr. Jim," she exclaimed and was gone with a flash of white teeth.

Jim's thoughts were chaotic as he sat there. Life seemed to have taken on a new zest in the last few minutes. He could see Fremont, across the river. It seemed a most prosaic place just now.

Rita's guitar hung from a post beside the table. He took it down and plucked it idly. He knew all the popular tunes of the day, both Mexican and American. He tried several. Somehow none of them seemed to suit his

mood. He was about to hang the guitar back in its place when inspiration struck him, and he hummed and played the melody of a tune that had been popular at the Mesa Franceisca a few weeks ago. It was Rita's song.

He smiled whimsically as he finished.

"Sing it again, Jim," a voice implored, and he glanced up to find Rita gazing at him from the doorway. "Just the chorus," she insisted.

"I thought I was alone," Jim explained as he continued to strum the guitar. "You made me love that song. It's kinda—real to me."

There was something in his voice that thrilled her, and she half closed her eyes to shut the world out as he sang:

Rio Rita, life is sweeter,
Rita, when you are near.
Rio Rita, life's completer,
Rita, to have you here.
All I ask from above
Is one day your lips will say,
I love you!
Rio Rita, *Señorita,* here is my heart.

The song ended, and neither seemed willing to break the magic stillness that gripped them.

"Whenever you hear that song, think of me, will you, Rita?" he asked softly.

"I always will," she murmured, her throat strangely dry with emotion, "and wonder who you are and what brought you to my Mexico." She recalled herself to the more prosaic role of chatelaine of the Rancho and sprang to her feet. "Your chocolate—I will spoil it."

She was back presently with a foam-covered pot of chocolate such as one finds only in Mexico—flavored with cinnamon and beaten to a froth.

Jim sipped it with relish.

"I wish I could stay here in your garden forever," he volunteered as he put his cup aside.

"You might grow very tired of it, Mr. Jim. There is just Roberto and me." Suddenly her hand flew to her mouth to stifle a gasp of consternation. What had become of Roberto. Had this handsome stranger so bewitched her that she had forgotten her own brother? Jim noted her perturbation.

"What is it?" he demanded, glancing about him nervously as though expecting to find General Esteban and his men at the gates.

"My brother—Roberto!" Rita exclaimed. "He is gone. He is on his way into San Luca. The note said he would stop at the Mesa Franceisca. General Esteban will trap him."

Stewart's mouth tightened menacingly as he got to his feet. He gripped Rita's hands and stared deep into her eyes.

"You know you can trust me. Tell me—what is there between your brother and General Esteban? Why does he want him?"

"I wish I knew! I only know that Roberto is away more and more. A month ago the General and he were good friends—too good, I thought. If anything happens to Roberto—" She closed her eyes to hide the tears that welled up in them.

"No harm shall come to Roberto. I promise it, Rita! I must go. I have stayed too long already."

"Too long, Jim?"

"Don't misunderstand me," he begged," but

I mustn't be found here. I can't let them catch up with me yet."

"You?" Rita gasped. She stepped back and stared at him with growing amazement. "I—I don't understand."

"Of course you don't. Do not try to at present. You will know soon enough." He paused and lowered his voice. "You have heard of the Kinkajou, *Señorita?*"

Rita stood thunderstruck at this reference to the bandit. She crossed herself excitedly. "Holy Mother of God!" she gasped.

"Take my word for it—he has robbed his last bank!"

Jim saw the questions leaping to her lips—questions he did not want to answer just then. He caught her hand and brushed his lips against it.

"*Adios,* Rita!" he called from the patio wall. "We shall be together soon."

He dropped from sight. She ran to the wall, but Jim was gone. A few minutes later she heard a madly-driven horse gallop away.

"Pedro! Timoteo!" she called.

The two peons came running.

"Pedro, did you ever see the Kinkajou?" The old man shook his head. "Or you, Timoteo?"

"*Madre de Dios,* no!" Timoteo exploded. "But he is a villain. They say he will steal anything."

"I think they are right," Rita murmured. And to herself she added, "Even steal a girl's heart."

CHAPTER VI

AT THE MESA FRANCEISCA

In the days before the Volstead Act made drinking popular in the United States, the Mesa Franceisca could not have existed. Two enterprising gentlemen from San Antonio had forseen that Texans and the big spenders from the hinterland to the north must have some place to go where the sky was the limit and expense didn't matter. They had poured a fortune into the Mesa Franceisca.

An architect from California and a landscape gardener who knew his business had evolved a dream that might have been put to better use. It was a place of beauty and luxury—and, necessarily, heartaches. The two Texans had soon been erased from the picture. In some way, they had forgotten to reckon with the overlords of San Luca. Or perhaps it was that some envious brother had found

the crack in their armor, for the place was still American owned, and it was a proverbial gold mine.

When revolution swept over San Luca nowadays it was not the custom-house that interested the incoming general half so much as the Mesa Franceisca. As a consequence, revolution or not, the place was neutral ground and by no accident or design had any of its guests been treated to the smell of gun-powder, save in such personal affrays as were beyond the province of the management.

The shrewd showman who dictated its policy provided a colorful array of Mexican peddlers and vendors, beautiful girls and irresistible music. In the evening, a marimba band, one of the most famous in Mexico, regaled the guests with dreamy waltzes and exciting tangos, from the cool, inviting depths of the wide veranda.

Ed Lovett, who was on the best of terms with the José, the sleek-haired major domo of the Mesa Franceisca, had come over early in the day to make the reservation for Chick and Dolly and arrange a bridal dinner.

The Mesa suited Ed to a T. He was the type who from choice gravitate to the regions of least restraint. He was in a merry mood as evening came on and Chick and Dolly were due to arrive.

The vendors had found him easy picking, except an old woman selling birds.

"I don't want a bird!" he told her for the fourth time.

Her daughter stepped into the breach. She was a very pretty daughter.

"Please, *Señor,*" she coaxed.

"All right," Lovett nodded groggily. "Give me a bird."

"Sounds like a crap game," he told himself. "Gettin' hot whatever it is."

He suddenly found himself in front of a closely packed ring in which two game cocks were flying at each other. He sat down to enjoy the fun, but two Mexican policemen arrived almost at the same time, and the birds were spirited away. The crowd melted as though by magic, and, looking very virtuous, worked his way back to the veranda where the marimba band was playing.

In the space reserved for dancing, a girl in a flaming red dress was doing a tango. Lovett recognized her and moved around to a point of vantage.

He was about to drop into a vacant chair when he saw General Esteban seated a few tables away. The General waved his hand in invitation and Lovett joined him. They shook hands heartily. Gonzales, who also was present, had to be satisfied with a nod from the lawyer.

"You remember her, eh?" General Esteban asked, pointing his cigar in the direction of Carmen, the dancer.

Lovett nodded and grinned.

"She's still got her shape, eh?" the General laughed. "But that damn temper. I tell you, that girl's a devil, Lovett."

"All depends on how you handle 'em," Ed argued.

Carmen realized they were talking about her. She had been Esteban's favorite before Rita Ferguson had captivated him. The memory kindled her smouldering resentment and

she began to flirt outrageously with Lovett, hoping to hurt the General.

Her game was a failure as far as Esteban was concerned, but Lovett fell very easily. As Carmen danced close to their table she dropped the rose that she held in her teeth. Lovett caught it and put it in his button-hole.

"It's wonderful what some women can do with a rose," he sighed.

"Depends on the rose, too," Esteban replied profoundly. "She made me a bed of roses—and left the thorns in."

The dance ended with Carmen striking an alluring posture just in front of Ed. He applauded wildly.

"You're great!" he exclaimed, and as couples moved out on the floor to dance, he turned to Esteban. "Pardon an old friend, General," he grinned, and without an invitation put his arm around Carmen and swung her into the rhythm of the dance.

The liege lord of San Luca watched them with an amused grin.

"That stupid Gringo better watch his

pocket-book," he murmured to Gonzales. Gonzales' mouth opened in an unlovely grin

Lovett got a little light-headed as Carmen clung passionately to him.

"You know, if you play your cards right, you can make me, baby," he told her confidentially.

"*Si?* You have such temperament, *Señor!* Such fire!"

"You noticed that, eh?" Ed smiled. "Say! I'll tell the world I've got fire. When I get hot everything in ten feet of me gets singed!"

"Oh!" Carmen sighed maddeningly. "If only you could make the kiss like you make the speech!"

"Who said I can't?" he asked indignantly. "You don't know what you're talking about. When I kiss 'em they stay kissed!"

Lovett boldly tried to prove his boast, but with the artistry of the practiced coquette, Carmen wiggled out of his reach.

"You are a great lover, aren't you?"

"Am I? Five minutes alone with me and you're a girl with a past. I'm as slippery as the Kinkajou."

"Yes?" Carmen studied him shrewdly. "Big reward for him, huh?" Ed nodded. They danced on for a few moments.

"Maybe I get that reward," she whispered.

Lovett glanced at her sharply.

"No," you're foolin'! You don't know the Kinkajou—do you?"

"Maybe I do—maybe I don't."

"Well—I'll see you later about this," Ed declared with a cautious look about the veranda. "We might do business."

The dance ended and Lovett started to lead Carmen to a table for refreshments.

"I am sorry, *Señor,* but no. I am busy," said she. "As for the Kinkajou—that is a secret, yes?"

"Well, I should say," Ed assured her heartily. "Why the reward is only ten thousand. We don't want to split it with the rest of Mexico."

Carmen had achieved her purpose, and she left with a pretty smile. José, the manager of the Mesa Franceisca, was waiting for Lovett.

"*Señor* Lovett, the little bridal nest you have

asked me to prepare for your friends is ready. When do they arrive?"

"They'll be here presently," Ed assured him after a hasty glance at his watch, although with matters progressing so interestingly with Carmen he would have been just as well satisfied had they never come.

The noisy put-put of a motor-cycle drew their attention to the entrance. A side car was attached to it and just behind it came a motor.

"There they are now!" Lovett exclaimed. "Chick has brought the girls along from the Casa Palomar."

A large "Just Married" sign decorated the motor-cycle. Carmen and the other professional entertainers at the Mesa Franceisca had an acquaintance with Dolly and the others. They greeted her vociferously.

"Well," Lovett beamed on them, "so you're married! How does it seem?"

"Simply magnolius!" Dolly answered.

"And the wedding?"

"Great! We put it on right for the glory of Fremont and the good old United States."

"Who gave you away, Dolly?" Carmen asked.

"Gave me away?" Dolly countered. "What do you mean? Nobody said a word!"

"Ain't she wonderful, Ed?" Chick exclaimed proudly as every one laughed at Dolly's wisecrack.

"Get me out of this thing, Chick," Dolly pleaded as she struggled to wiggle out of the side car. "This undernourished tin lizzie may be everything in the world to you but it's a pain in the back to me."

"Why don't you open the door, honey?" he asked.

"Doors?" Dolly queried. "My God, do these things have doors?"

Chick rushed to her assistance and handed her down gallantly.

"There's service for you," he grinned. He looked around for Lovett, but Ed had been called to the telegraph office. Chick was no stranger to José, the manager.

"Have you got our rooms ready?" he demanded.

"*Si, Señor,* the best in the house. I hope they are not too expensive."

"Expensive," Chick snorted contemptuously. "Why, I stop at only the best hotels—and I've got the towels to prove it. Don't you worry about the expense. Have someone take Gertie around to the garage and give her a quart of gasoline."

A servant wheeled the motor-cycle away.

"These ladies are my guests, too, José," Chick informed the manager. "See that they are treated right. Y'understand?"

José bowed and sent their baggage upstairs.

"What do you say if we go up and get settled?" the new husband inquired.

"Anything you say, Chickie," Dolly cooed.

Chick offered her his arm and they started for the stairs. They had taken only a step or two when Lovett rushed up, more excited than usual, and put a hand on Chick's shoulder.

"Just a minute, Chick," he whispered portentuously. "I got to speak to you."

Lovett's excitement communicated itself to Chick at once. He wondered what was wrong.

"Excuse me a minute, baby," he said to Dolly. "I'll be right up. Do you mind?"

When Dolly had left them alone, they found some chairs where they could talk without being overheard.

"How is everything, Chick?" Lovett asked. Chick glared at him.

"I thought you had something to tell me."

"I have. But you look so happy——"

"I am, Ed! No mistake this time. I'm starting fifty years of billing and cooing today."

"You got that wrong, Chick," Lovett declared solemnly. "Let me set you right. The cooing stops when the honeymoon is over. But the billing goes on forever."

"It's worth it, you darn fool," Chick grinned sheepishly. "Didn't Dolly look swell?"

"She certainly did you credit," Lovett admitted.

"Well, she ought to. I spent about three hundred and fifty on her torso."

"On her what?" Lovett gasped.

"Her torso!"

"You're crazy! What do you mean, torso?"

"The things a woman wears when she gets married!"

"You mean her trousseau," Ed exclaimed with a sigh of relief. "I thought you'd started a new fashion or something."

"Sure, that's it. I'm kinda giddy yet."

"The worst is yet to come," said Lovett. "When did you get married?"

"About half an hour ago." He caught Lovett staring at him strangely. "Say, what's the idea? Why all these questions? If you've got something up your sleeve, spill it."

"Well," and Lovett paused to give his words proper emphasis, "as your legal advisor, I've got to hand you a nasty shock."

Chick grinned as he thought he caught the drift of his friend's words.

"I got yuh!" he exclaimed. "You mean the bill for my divorce. Listen, if it's a dime over a hundred dollars I won't pay it."

"You'll pay it, all right! Why, the champion tightwad of Texas paid me two hundred for his—and he'll be back for another one."

"He did?" Chick questioned with mock con-

cern. "Well, shake hands with the new champion!"

"I wasn't kidding, Chick," Lovett told him. "This is serious. I'm afraid your Mexican divorce isn't any good."

"What?" Chick yelled so loudly that half the people on the veranda jumped up, wondering what was happening.

"Sit down," Lovett exclaimed as he pulled Chick back into his seat. "I just got this telegram sent over from the office. It's from the first Mrs. Bean. She wants you held for bigamy if you marry Dolly. Read it!"

Perspiration beaded Chick's brow as he read the wire. He looked around like a drowning man hunting for an oar and found only Lovett to keep him from going under.

"You—you know this ain't right," he whined. "Me, a bigamist!"

"Apparently she's right. New York State doesn't recognize Mexican divorces. If she gets nasty, you'll spend four or five years in jail."

"You know I'm a sick man," Chick groaned. "I could never do that long."

"They won't be particular. They'll let you do as long as you can."

"Oh, be serious," Chick entreated. "You can do something."

"This is the situation, Chick. You've got to get the first Mrs. Bean to accept this divorce —money will do it—and until that is settled you and Dolly have got to live apart."

"On my wedding day you tell me that?" Chick cried. "You mean the honeymoon's off? Why that little girl is upstairs right now unpacking her thingamajigs, waiting for me."

"Stop! You'll have me crying in a minute. I tell you the honeymoon is off. It's as cold as a heated taxi! You've got to be a man and tell Dolly the bad news."

"But not now! Can't I tell her tomorrow?"

"Not unless you want to spend the rest of your days in Mexico."

Chick wrung his hands. The prospects of a bootlegger south of the Rio Grande did not appeal to him.

"Well, you'll have to come up with me and

help break the news," he declared soberly. "It'll break Dolly's heart."

They found her radiant in a suit of lounging pajamas. Lovett actually blinked his eyes as she threw her arms around Chick and hugged him to her.

"I don't want to hurry you out, but this is supposed to be my honeymoon, Mr. Lovett," Dolly remarked to Ed.

Before he could frame a reply, Chick leaped into the breach.

"Ed wants me to go hunting with him and some of the boys," he lied.

"Gee, that's lovely of him. When do you plan to go?"

"T-To-night," Chick faltered.

"Tonight? Going hunting on your wedding day? Say! Look at me, Chick Bean! You're holding something back. I wondered why Ed kept you downstairs. Tell me what it is!"

Dolly had the truth out of him presently.

"I knew it was too good to be true," she sobbed. "I was too happy."

"Never mind, baby, Ed will fix things up."

"Ed?" she exclaimed contemptuously.

"You're a swell lawyer, ain't you? You'd have both of us in jail if we listened to you, you big bimbo! You and your bootleg divorces!"

"Say, you ain't insinuating anything, are you?" Chick bristled.

"Now see what you've done," Dolly stormed at Lovett. "Get out of here. I never want to see you again!"

She threw herself down on the bed and began to sob madly. Ed began to look for a way out.

"You fix it up with her, Chick," he whispered. "I—I got some business downstairs."

CHAPTER VII

ONLY ONE CAN WIN

General Esteban and Gonzales had left the veranda shortly after Lovett had greeted Chick and Dolly. He had an apartment at his disposal at the Mesa Franceisca and often made use of it. His intelligence service, and it was not to be despised for its efficiency, had located Roberto. He knew the boy was near, even though he had not as yet put in an appearance. In such matters, General Esteban could exercise undreamed of patience, sure of the outcome and adding to his score against the boy as the hours grew.

The stranger who had humbled him before Rita was quite another matter. He hated the man, and did opportunity ever offer, the fact that the stranger was a Gringo would not stay his vengeance. Gonzales and two of his followers had scoured the country along the

river in an effort to round him up, but Stewart had slipped through their fingers.

Esteban paced the floor of his apartment, berating Gonzales for a fool and a bungler. Gonzales understood the great man better than any one supposed.

"No wonder we do not find him," said he. "When this Americano find out who eet ees he get fresh with, I guess he get across the river in a hurry."

This bit of flattery was not lost on the General.

"You may be right, *muchachito,*" he admitted, but at that very moment, with the audacity that had always stood him in good stead, Stewart rode up to the Mesa Franceisca and turned his horse over to one of the peons. José, the manager, greeted him coolly. Jim's clothes and dusty appearance were not open sesames to his establishment.

"Let me have a room," Jim informed him. "I may be staying here two or three days."

"We are very crowded," José stalled. "Who are you, *Señor,* and what is your business?"

Jim stared at him until the Mexican shifted

his eyes uneasily. Truly these Gringos had a way with them.

"What do you care?" Stewart asked, "as long as you are paid in advance?"

José wavered. Perhaps he could accommodate him. Jim smiled and tossed the man a twenty-dollar goldpiece. "Keep the change," he added.

They were quite alone for the moment. José smiled and started to pocket the coin when he glanced up to see several horsemen ride into the courtyard.

"Humph!" he gasped. "Texas Rangers!"

Jim was no less surprised than he. In a flash he recognized Sergeant Wilkins, McGinn and Freeman. He pulled his sombrero lower over his face. "I'll go up to my room later," he said to José. José nodded and scurried away.

With easy nonchalance, Stewart leaned against a pillar and began to roll a cigarette, wondering if his men would recognize him at once.

The rangers dismounted and sent their horses to the stable. They were unarmed, and

Jim surmised from that that they were ostensibly out on a lark, though secretly searching either for him or some clue to the Kinkajou.

They made for a side entrance to the cafe. Jim deliberately shifted his position so as to block their way.

"Come on, move over!" Wilkins ordered.

Jim moved over just enough to let him squeeze by. Wilkins was sore in an instant and as he gave Jim a push, Stewart stuck out his foot and tripped him.

"Oh, a fresh guy, eh?" Wilkins ripped out hotly. "How would you like a punch in the nose?"

Jim kept his head bowed and smoked his cigarette.

"I like eet, *Señor,*" he replied with provoking assurance. "You got one, eh?"

McGinn and Freeman, scenting trouble, closed in on him. Wilkins squared off to let him have it.

"Eef you hit me, I'll tell that great beeg wife of yours," Jim flung at him carelessly.

"You'll tell her what?" Wilkins demanded angrily.

"I tell her you come to Mesa Franceisca looking for Mexican chicken."

Wilkins' hand started out, but McGinn caught it.

"Go easy, Wilkins," said he. "We don't want any trouble." He turned to Jim then. "Say, who are you anyhow?"

Without warning he snatched Jim's sombrero from his head. They recognized him instantly.

"Careful!" Stewart warned as they opened their mouths to fire questions at him.

"What are you doing here—and in that rig?" McGinn demanded.

"I'd sure like to know, too!" Wilkins exclaimed, unable to hold himself in. "Do you happen to know that the Kinkajou cracked the Fremont bank last night? We been hunting all over hell for you."

"Sh—be careful, boys," Jim begged. "I know all about the bank robbery. Tell me, what are you doing here?"

"Looking for you," Wilkins answered, "and also trying to get the low down on Esteban's floating night-club. That last is just a

stall for headquarters. I tell you, Jim, we been worried about you."

"You haven't told why you're here yet, Captain," Freeman prompted.

"I came over to grab the Kinkajou."

"The Kinkajou? You mean you've got a line on him?"

"You bet! And get this straight, boys, you don't know who I am. If you run into me while you're here, don't recognize me."

"But this is too dangerous a job for you to tackle alone," Wilkins objected. "We are here as private citizens, but we ain't going to let that stop us from seeing this through with you."

"It ain't that big reward that's——" Wilkins began. Jim cut him off.

"You know better than that, Wilkie! I can't touch that money. What I'm doing is for the honor of the force."

"Pardon, old dear, I know that's so. But I don't get you at all. This bank robbery had brought things to a head. If they don't transfer you it will be a miracle. I tell you, Jim, you've just got to bring in the Kinkajou."

"That's what I aim to do," Stewart declared soberly. "He's had all the breaks so far, but he can't always beat the luck of the Rangers. Go on, now, and have your fun. Don't worry about me."

They hung back, but Jim refused to change his plans.

"Squawk if you need us," Wilkins said as they moved away. "I reckon we won't be long in getting there if you do."

Jim nodded and they entered the cafe. When they had gone, he chose a table where he was rather well screened from the rest of the veranda and ordered refreshments. He had not sat there long before he saw Carmen come out and glance around furtively. An outside stairway led to the second floor. Her interest seemed to center on it.

Dinner was being served within, and as a consequence there was no one on the veranda save Jim. He knew Carmen had not seen him, and as she signalled to some one above to come down, he leaned back so that he could see without being seen.

To his surprise, Roberto Ferguson stole down the stairs.

"Oh, you frightened me," he heard Carmen say. "Why did you come here, Roberto?" Her concern for him was genuine.

"I had to come," Roberto answered. "I've been hiding here all afternoon. I saw you dance with Lovett."

Carmen put her cheek against his.

"He's a fool, Roberto! Don't mind him. Maybe we can use him. Kiss me!"

Roberto strained her to him passionately.

"Where is Esteban?" he asked.

"He was upstairs with Gonzales a minute ago. Gonzales and his men have been looking for you," she added nervously. "He doesn't suspect anything, Roberto?"

"Not yet! He was to the rancho this morning. I could kill him for what he said to Rita. She sent him away—she and a——" He stopped short as he caught sight of Wilkins and his pals sitting down to dinner within.

"Who's that?" he demanded anxiously. "Rangers!"

"Just over to have a few drinks and a good

time, I guess," Carmen explained. Roberto shook his head as he pondered what their presence might mean.

"I don't like it," said he. "They got no business here."

He whispered something to Carmen and then started across the deserted patio. He pulled up short of a sudden and sniffed the air. The smoke from Jim's cigarette had drifted across to him. Like a tiger, he whirled and faced Stewart.

Carmen saw him wheel. She hurried to his side.

"What is it, Roberto?" she gasped.

"Captain Stewart of the Texas Rangers!" Roberto announced insolently. He swept off his hat and bowed to Jim derisively. "So pleased to meet you!"

Carmen's face paled beneath the make-up for a moment. Her eyes snapped and she glared defiantly at Stewart.

"So you come to make eavesdrop on me, huh?" she demanded. "I show you, you damned Gringo!"

"*Silencio!*" Roberto exclaimed. He forced

her back as she leaped at Jim. "Captain Stewart make no monkey business with me."

Jim got to his feet and bowed to them.

"Do not misunderstand me, *Señor,*" Jim implored, "I did not come here to make what you call monkey business, nor is it my custom to take advantage of a lady. The last time we met, it was in my country; we are in yours now —and I ask only the consideration from you that you had from me."

Roberto had no difficulty in recalling that but for Captain Stewart he would have been treated roughly the night the motor-bus was held up. That he should have to be reminded of it brought a dull blush to his cheeks.

"I beg your pardon, *Señor,*" he murmured humbly. "I forgot myself. But in Texas you have promise to keep your eye on me; I do the same in Mexico, for in a game of wits, only one can win. I bid you goodnight."

Jim called José after they had gone and was shown to his room. Sleep was far from his mind. He turned out the light and sat smoking in the darkness of the tiny balcony that extended from his window.

It was a magnificent night, cool and star-flecked. The dreamy music of the orchestra floated up to him, but it brought Jim no sense of peace. Thought of Rita filled him with longing. He had promised her to look after Roberto. The bitter irony of that brought a grim smile to his lips.

"The boy is right," he mused, "only one of us can win. And yet, one can win and still lose."

Downstairs, Roberto also smoked in the darkness. His thoughts were as turbulent as Jim's for he realized that it was Stewart who had scaled the patio wall that morning.

CHAPTER VIII

A LITTLE MATTER OF MONEY

Rita had waited all day long for her brother to return home. Every passing hour added to her feeling that something dreadful had happened to him.

Jim had promised to protect him, but although the promise had loomed large under the magnetic spell of his personality, Rita could not help but ask herself if she were a child that the promise of a stranger, even though he had been courageous enough to send General Esteban about his business, had even momentarily assured her that Roberto was not in danger.

"He was so brave—so nice," she murmured to herself a dozen times. Once, as she glanced into her mirror, she sighed deeply. "Rita," she said aloud, "you are a little fool. He will never come back!"

Jim had implied that he might be the Kinkajou. She had long since convinced herself that he was not. Certainly the Kinkajou was using San Luca for the hide-out. That he could use San Luca as a place of refuge and not be acquainted with General Esteban passed belief.

And yet, anything was possible in Mexico. She knew General Esteban had not come to the rancho that morning to see her. Just what he wanted of Roberto remained the greatest mystery.

Afternoon wore away without bringing any one. By evening, she had made up her mind to go to the Mesa Franceisca herself and try to find her brother.

When Pedro had the horse ready, he begged to accompany her.

"No, I shall go alone," she told him. "I expect Roberto to bring me home."

Pedro watched her as she drove away.

"She does not put on her best dress to meet Roberto," he said to Timoteo.

Just as she turned into the road that led directly to the Mesa Franceisca, a white owl flew

up out of the chaparral and circled above her. Rita was Mexican enough to be thoroughly superstitious. She crossed herself hurriedly to ward off the bad luck of such an omen, and whipped the horse into a trot.

At the Mesa, dinner was over. The guests had strolled out upon the veranda. General Esteban was not among them. Word had reached him that his men had trapped Roberto and were holding him a prisoner in the cellar. He and Gonzales repaired there at once.

"Bring him in," he said to one of his men.

The room was a cavernous affair, once used as a gambling room. Since Esteban had the run of the place he had no fear of being disturbed.

"Ah, *Señor,* sit down," he exclaimed as two of his men brought the boy in. He motioned for his men to wait outside. Gonzales did not offer to leave. "You, too," the General added.

Roberto continued to stand.

"Why not sit down?" Esteban asked. "Here is some of my favorite cognac."

Roberto pushed the drink aside.

"It might be my last one," Roberto re-

marked pointedly. "I'd like to know why you searched the rancho this morning and annoyed Rita?"

"You would, eh?" Esteban replied nonchalantly. "Well, I would like to know where you have been since you left the Casa Palomar in Fremont last night."

"Have you turned policeman?" Roberto flung back at him.

"I may not be a policeman—but I have certain duties to perform for—for Mexico."

Roberto sneered at him. Esteban pretended not to notice.

"For Mexico, eh? That's why you wanted to see me! Since when has Mexico asked help from a Russian?"

General Esteban's feet came down from the table with a bang. He puffed out his cheeks as though he were a grampus. He cursed violently for a moment.

"What do you mean—a Russian?" he demanded.

"You ought to know! Your accent is good and your English is as Mexican as mine—but you do not fool me, Ravenoff—General Raven-

off," Roberto added with all the contempt he could put into the words.

Esteban tossed away his cigar and glared at Rita's brother.

"My friend, are you going to be so foolish as the others who have tried to force me to give up my lands and my—position?" he demanded. "Those others have disappeared, it seems."

"That's a little way you have," Roberto answered scornfully.

"Then you are prepared for it!" Esteban bowed with an air of finality. "I didn't want to lose my temper with you—but you knew too much. Believe me, you will come in very handy, my friend." He raised his voice and called Gonzales.

Gonzales popped his head in the door. Three of his men came in with him.

"What is it, General?" Gonzales asked.

"He wants you to do a little dirty work that he hasn't the nerve to do himself," Roberto exclaimed. "But I've been in tighter places than this—throw up your hands!"

Esteban cursed Gonzales for failing to con-

fiscate the gun that Roberto now brandished at them.

"The tables are turn very quick, my General," Roberto grinned mirthlessly.

General Esteban was about to attempt a new course with Roberto when he saw one of the men raise his arms to leap at the boy from the rear. He held his breath as the man catapulted himself upon Roberto.

Both of them went down. Gonzales kicked the gun out of the boy's hand. It was all over in a hurry.

"Now the tables turn back," General Esteban purred. "Tie him up and take him away."

"He's better dead," Gonzales protested in a whisper to his master.

"Yes, but I don't want his sister wearing a long face because of his death. I couldn't love a long face, Gonzales."

Gonzales nodded his head understandingly. He even ventured a grin.

Roberto struggled in vain with his captors. They had him securely tied in a few seconds.

"In a few days," General Esteban confided in his lieutenant, "my plans will come out.

Mebbe we'll find his body floating in the Rio Grande. In the meantime see that he don't get away."

He came up to Roberto and smiled at him pityingly.

"You ain't so damn smart now, eh?" he smirked. "Search him!"

Roberto tried to resist, but he was helpless. Gonzales tossed the contents of the boy's pockets upon the table.

"What's this?" General Esteban questioned as he unfolded a paper bill. "American money, eh? A Thousand-dollar bill!" He bent over it and read the serial number printed on it. "Number 0557!" he exclaimed, and his surprise was not feigned. "That ees one of the bills the Kinkajou stole from the Fremont bank!"

He and Gonzales looked at each other in amazement.

"See if he has any more, Gonzales," General Esteban ordered.

Gonzales went through Roberto's pockets again. They were empty. The General called him over into a corner and they spoke rapidly

to each other in Spanish. Esteban came back presently and glared at the prisoner.

"I ask only once—where you get this money?"

"Wouldn't you like to know, my General?" Roberto mocked him.

"You talk quick!" Gonzales prompted as he stuck a gun into Roberto's stomach.

"Don't kill him!" General Esteban warned. "There is a reward of ten thousand dollars for him."

"For the Kinkajou you mean," Roberto smiled.

"Well, you'll do for him, caught with part of the money in your pocket. This is a very good joke on you, my friend."

"Take him away," he said to Gonzales in Spanish. "You know where to put him. Don't let him get away."

Gonzales had to hit the boy a clip on the head before they could get him out.

When they had gone, General Esteban picked up the bill and fingered it gingerly. "Well," he mused, "she's damn strange how

he get it, but it's all right. I guess Rita say yes to me now."

He put the bill down and lit a fresh cigar, trying to figure out how he could keep his advantage over Roberto and Rita and still make use of the thousand dollars. Avarice overcame his better judgment finally.

"Oh, hell," he muttered, "I make her say yes anyhow," and he stuffed the bill into his pocket.

There was a house phone in the room. He asked to have Ed Lovett join him. Ed appeared a minute or two later.

"You sent for me, General?" he exclaimed with his usual air of importance.

"Sit down and have a drink," Esteban replied with a wave of his hand. "Here's a cigar."

Lovett knew he had not been called there for nothing. "What's on your mind, General?" he asked as he puffed the General's cigar.

"Have another drink," General Esteban countered. Whatever it was that he wanted became more important in Ed's mind at once.

"We make some pretty good deal, Ed, eh?"

Esteban said at last. "I do you some pretty good turn——"

"Why, of course," Ed assured him. "Anytime I can do you a little favor——"

"I knew it," Esteban interrupted him. He drew out a large roll of bills, among them the one he had taken from Roberto. "I want to change these into Mexican money. You take care of this for me, Ed?"

He handed Lovett the roll of bills.

"What, American money for Mexican—that ought to be a cinch!" Ed exclaimed. The thousand dollar bill caught his eye. He spread it out stiffly.

"Pretty, isn't it? Look at that picture—DeSoto discovering Hollywood or something." His brow wrinkled suddenly and he could not repress a start as he saw the serial number on the bill. He turned over two or three others of large denomination. One brand new one, marked Fremont National Bank, brought the perspiration to his forehead.

"Say," he exclaimed, "this is stuff that was stolen from the bank last night! I got a list

of numbers given out by the bank this morning."

He pulled it out and compared the numbers hastily.

"This is the stuff the Kinkajou got, all right," he gasped.

Esteban's countenance had not changed expression.

"What of it?" Lovett echoed. "Whew! Say! Let me look at you, General. Are you the Kinkajou?"

Esteban flicked the ashes from his cigar.

"Don't be silly," he grinned. "I get mine easier. Those bills belong to a good friend of mine; he was here just a minute ago. He asks me to help him out—and—— "

"But this is dangerous, General!"

"You don't do it for nothing! The Kinkajou pay you well."

"But don't you know the numbers of these bills have been published in the American newspapers and everyone is on the lookout for them? The minute I try to pass one, they'll hop on me and say I'm the Kinkajou."

"Ha! Ha!" Esteban laughed. "You, the Kinkajou! That is very funny, Ed."

"What's so funny about it?" Lovett demanded. "I might be a bandit. I'm a lawyer!"

"Course there isn't so much difference," Esteban admitted with well feigned gravity. "But what do you say? This don't have to be done tonight."

Lovett knew he dared not say no if he was to stay in business. The crookedness of what he had been asked to do was offset by the profit he might make—as General Esteban suspected. It was only the danger that concerned Lovett.

"I'll see what I can do," he said finally.

"You'll find a way," Esteban assured him and gave him a whack on the back to prove it. "Mebbe that bootlegger friend of yours can do something."

"Say, that's an idea! He's passed worse stuff than this!"

CHAPTER IX

LOVETT MAKES HAY

STEWART was well acquainted with the fact that General Esteban had an apartment at the Mesa Franceisca. An overwhelming desire to investigate it had been one of his prime reasons in deciding to stay there over night. Chance, playing into his hands, at last, had placed him on the second floor of the same wing in which the General's rooms were located.

From where he sat on his own balcony, he could catch the low hum of Esteban's voice. The telephone bell stopped the conversation going on there finally. Jim leaned forward anxiously, hoping the boss of San Luca would be called downstairs.

A moment later the lights were turned out. Stewart heard the door slam.

"I'm going to take a chance," he muttered

to himself. "If he traps me there, I'll try and talk my way out, somehow."

The little balconies that banked the windows of the second floor were fully six feet apart. To get from one to the other, Stewart had to trust to the vines that grew rank over the wall.

"Here goes," he smiled and swung himself out into space. The vines held, and with cat-like agility, he passed from one window to another until he stood looking into Esteban's apartment. The balcony windows were ajar, and he slipped inside without glancing back to note if he had been seen.

He dared not switch on the lights, for fear the General might cross the patio below and take alarm.

A small pocket flashlight enabled him to find the things for which he searched. A closet engaged his attention. It was packed with odds and ends of wearing apparel. On the floor, he found a small black bag. It was unlocked and he drew it out to examine its contents. Without warning a key turned in the outer door.

Jim had barely time to grab the bag and leap back into the closet.

"What is it, José?" he heard Esteban ask.

"I got some news for you," the manager of the Inn replied. "I think I know who is this mysterious Jim you been looking for."

"*Si?*" General Esteban exclaimed sharply. "Who he is?"

"I think he is Captain Jim Stewart of the Texas Rangers."

"Stewart? Humph! *Ese hombre es un fiera!* Who told you all this?

"An hour or so ago a man come here and ask for room," José told him. "He is dressed like a vaquero—not very clean one at that. I don't like his looks. I try to turn him away, but nothing doing. Somethings about him kinda stay in my mind. I got to thinking—and then I remember. Captain Stewart, he been here before. Sure enough I knew it is him. Maybe she's just accident, but three of his men are here, too."

Esteban described Jim's dress of the morning to José.

"No mistake," José insisted. "It is Stewart! I got a pass-key. When he go down for dinner—we take a look at his saddle-bag, eh?"

Esteban's excitement was great, but he gradually cursed himself back to normal.

"You don't say nothing, José," he warned. "We take a look at him. Come on!"

Stewart, hiding in the stifling hot closet, breathed a sigh of relief. But at the door, Esteban stopped.

"Mebbe I better take a gun," Esteban grumbled. He wheeled and came toward the closet. Jim flattened himself against the rear wall behind a row of clothes. General Esteban reached in and drew a pistol out of a gun-belt. His hand was not ten inches from Stewart. Jim held his breath. Esteban glanced at the gun to see that it was loaded and then closed the door and followed José down the hall.

As urgent as it was that he get back to his room at once, Jim waited to glance at the contents of the black bag. It was half-filled with Mexican money and American bills of small denomination. Jim ran his eyes over the serial numbers. They were not among those given out by the Fremont bank. He snapped the bag shut savagely and began to climb back across the wall.

He reached his room safely and slumped down into a chair to catch his breath. Almost as he did so he heard a key being inserted in the door. The room was in darkness, and he waited expectantly.

José poked his head into the room.

"Well, what do you want?" Stewart inquired.

"Oh, *Señor,* a thousand pardons!" José gasped, dissembling his surprise rather well. "I forget I gave you this room."

"No harm done," Jim answered easily. He saw General Esteban continue on down the hall.

José bowed and withdrew.

"They'll be back the moment I go out," Jim smiled. He drew his saddle-bags over to him and extracted certain papers that he did not care to have them see.

Esteban had recognized Jim's voice as belonging to the man who had humbled him at the Rancho Ferguson that morning. Downstairs, he had Wilkins and the other rangers pointed out to him.

What their presence meant, if the mysteri-

ous Jim was really Captain Stewart, Esteban did not know, but he sensed that it concerned him, and he determined to prove Jim's identity before the evening was much older. He was about to retrace his way upstairs when Chick Bean hailed him. Esteban waved him away and went on about his business.

Chick had attempted to drown his sorrows and had almost succeeded. In a reckless mood, born of Dolly's tears and a plethora of cocktails, he had played the roulette wheel. Fortune had smiled on him and he had plunged. His hands were filled with bills.

"What's the matter, sore because I took the house?" Chick called after the departing General.

Esteban did not pause to reply.

"S'all right," Chick grinned. "Here today, and gone tomorrow, that's my motto."

Lovett spied him and took him in tow.

"What's the meaning of all this?" Ed demanded when they reached his room.

"Cracked the bank!" Chick answered. "Waiter!"

Lovett rang the bell. His eyes bulged as

Chick attempted to count his winnings. The waiter appeared before he had finished.

"Bring me some cognac," Chick ordered.

"Pale?" the waiter inquired.

"Pail?" Chick snorted. "No, a bottle will do plenty, *muchacho!*"

He began to count the money again.

"I give up," he groaned. "I get less every time. What's that stuff?" he questioned, pointing to a bottle on the dresser.

"*Pulque,*" Lovett answered. "Have a drink?"

"That ain't to drink! You use that to polish your silver, you can't fool me, Ed."

"I don't want to fool you, Chick," Lovett exclaimed, changing his tone. "What did you and Dolly decide to do?"

"Where I go—you go! That's us. "We're going to stick it out if we go to jail."

"Well, you may," Lovett assured him solemnly. "Your first wife's lawyers had just wired me that Mrs. Bean number one is on her way here by plane."

"What? Chick's knees collapsed and he sank into a chair inertly.

"I warned you," Lovett went on. "The thing for you to do is to be among those absent when she arrives."

"What can I do? Where can I go?" Chick wailed pitifully.

"You might go to Oklahoma. They put you in jail for only two years up there for bigamy."

"Quit your kidding," Chick pleaded. "Can't you be serious. It's me that will have to go to jail, not you. Funny the fuss they make about a little wedding. Just a few words mumbled in a church—and you're married."

"Yeh, and just a few words mumbled in your sleep and you're divorced. Are you all set to go?"

"I'll have to be, I guess. I'll get this Mex money changed into the regular thing and—"

"I'll take care of that for you," Ed informed him, his mind made up to unload the stolen money on Chick. "I just happen to have ten one-thousand dollar bills in my pocket."

He counted them out and Chick took them.

"All nice new ones," he grinned as he

pushed over the pile of Mexican notes. "Don't get so much with them, but I sure like 'em."

"This may have to last me a long time," Chick said slowly as he put the bills into his pocket.

"They will," said Ed, and he might have added, about fifteen years.

The waiter knocked just then. Chick bawled out for him to enter. Lovett tried to pay the check but Chick got it away from him. The waiter raised his eyes at the size of the bill Chick offered him. He gasped as he read the serial number.

"Well, what's wrong with it?" Chick demanded.

The waited returned it to him with a bow.

"Nothing, *Señor,* nothing," he said respectfully. "I did not know. For you the cognac is free."

Chick shot a glance at Lovett. Ed's face was stony.

"What's the idea, you trying to flirt with me?" Chick demanded of the waiter.

"*Señor,*" the waiter bowed, "to me the Kinkajou is a great hero—a very great hero!"

Chick shook his head and blinked his eyes, wondering how miffed he was. He nudged Ed roguishly. "Sh, he thinks I am the Kinkajou."

"What, with a pan like yours?" Lovett demanded with a fine show of indignation. "Say, these waiters are getting too fresh. Beat it!"

Chick and Lovett finished the bottle of cognac before they parted. By that time Chick's courage had returned and Lovett began to realize that his subterfuge to get him away by threatening him with the arrival of Chick's first wife held little promise of success. But at the rate he was going, Chick would soon be too far gone to remember who had given him the tell-tale bills. In any event, Ed did not want to be caught with ten thousand dollars in his possession. He looked around for General Esteban, and not finding him downstairs, proceeded up to the General's apartment.

He found Esteban and José ensconsced amid the shrubbery on the upper porch where they could command a view of Jim's room. Lovett called the General aside.

"I got the money," he whispered as he shoved the roll of bills in the man's hand. "You can give me mine later."

Esteban nodded and Lovett went on to his own room.

Their warm friendliness was evidenced by the cordial greeting they called out to her.

(Scene from the Ralph Pictures, Rio Rita, with Bebe Daniels as Rio Rita)

CHAPTER X

"THAT GRINGO"

THE guests were strolling out from dinner by the time Rita reached the Mesa Franceisca. The stableboys and vendors recognized her at once. Their warm friendliness was evidenced by the cordial greeting they called out to her. Even the children, timid when so many Americans were about, left their mothers and swooped down on her.

"Let me help you," one of the stablemen begged and lifted her down as though she were the most important guest the Inn had ever welcomed.

"Thank you, Romero," she smiled. "Have you seen my brother Roberto here this evening?"

"He was here an hour ago," Romero told her. "He may be in the cafe."

"I will look," a waiter volunteered. Rita

thanked him and picked up a youngster and cuddled him affectionately. "My, what a big boy you are getting to be, Enriquez!" she exclaimed proudly.

The hearty welcome she had received reached the ears of José and General Esteban on the balcony of the hotel. José got up and started forward to learn the cause of the commotion.

"Sit down, you fool," General Esteban commanded angrily. "This Gringo will be coming out and catch us." He pulled the offending José back into his seat.

He was not a moment too soon, for Jim's door opened and he stepped out. Without pretending to sweep the balcony with his eyes, he walked toward the stairs. In back of a mass of potted palms he saw Esteban's dark eyes peering at him.

Jim passed on without letting him know that he knew he was there. The commotion at the entrance drew his attention momentarily, and to his surprise, he recognized Rita, surrounded by the children.

She did not see him as he gazed at her tenderly.

"Tell my brother I will be waiting in the garden," he heard her say. If he had thought her beautiful that morning, he found her doubly so now in her black dress, colorful mantilla and black lace.

Esteban heard him sigh as he watched Rita stroll into the moon-lit garden. With heart pounding, Jim stole down the stairs after her.

"It is him!" Esteban confided in José. "Why does the fool sigh like a love-sick calf? Who is it down there?"

"I tell you it is the *Señorita* Ferguson," José answered. "I recognize her voice."

"Rita—him!" General Esteban whipped out. *"Por Dios!"*

Jim's door stood open.

"Come on, I find out who this Gringo is *immediamente!"*

At the foot of the stairs Stewart paused, sure that he heard the door to his room close. "They are welcome to what they find," he smiled.

Stewart could see Rita standing beside a

pool in the center of the garden. The tinkling fountain at her feet played a symphony for his racing thoughts. The air was heavy with the exotic perfume of the night flowers. Jim drank in their fragrance hungrily.

"Rita! Rita!" he called softly as he ran toward her.

"Oh, Mr. Jim!" she cried, and the warm welcome in her eyes almost proved too much for Stewart.

"I am the luckiest man in Mexico," he exclaimed as he caught her hand.

Rita chose to pretend not to understand.

"You have found something, Mr. Jim?" she teased maddeningly.

"More precious than I ever knew could exist. All day I have been dreaming——"

"That is a very bad habit, *Señor,*" she laughed softly, "as I have just found out."

"Ever since this morning when I dropped into a certain garden," Jim went on breathlessly.

"Say—by the way, Mr. Jim, how you come to be in my garden?" Rita questioned, her dark eyes dancing.

"Kismet," Jim laughed.

"What is this kismet? I do not understand."

"Kismet—fate—it was predestined that I should drop into your garden."

Rita shook her head and a puzzled frown crept over her face.

"Those are very large words for small Mexican girl to understand."

"There is a very small word that means the same thing, Rita," Jim whispered tenderly. "It's all those things rolled into one. It's love!"

"So!" Rita queried with a saucy toss of her head. "I hear of that word, all right."

"It was in your garden," Jim explained. "Didn't the sun shine a little bit brighter?" Rita tried to remember.

"Didn't the air tingle? Couldn't you actually feel it?"

"Well, maybe a little," Rita admitted uncertainly.

"Didn't everything seemed changed—happier?" he persisted.

Rita thought deeply, or pretended to.

"Yes," she sighed at last, "now that you mention it, Mr. Jim."

"I knew it!" Stewart murmured. "It was —it was love, Rita! Can't I teach you to love me?"

"*Madre de Dios!*" murmured Rita. "Is this the first lesson?"

The waiter who had volunteered to find Roberto coughed discreetly as he approached them. Stewart could have tossed the man out of the garden for entering just then.

"I have looked everywhere for your brother," the man said in Spanish. "No one has seen him for an hour."

"Thank you, Juan," Rita replied. The waiter bowed and left them alone. "What shall I do?" she implored Jim.

"I saw Roberto this evening," Jim told her. "Why are you so worried about him."

"You don't understand," said she. "He was not home last night. This morning he comes, all tired and dusty, his horse covered with sweat. A few days ago the Rangers stopped him. They accused him of being the Kinkajou. You joke about the Kinkajou to

me, but when it is come so close to home it is no joke."

Stewart wanted to take her in his arms and comfort her. With an effort he restrained himself.

"Where do you think he was last night?" he asked, hating himself for the role fate had given him to play.

"I—I don't know—I mean he told me not to say," Rita finished miserably.

Stewart's face mirrored the twinge of pain that shot through him as Rita made this admission.

"Was he in Fremont last night?" he forced himself to ask.

"Why, yes—no— Oh, I don't know!" Why do you ask me these questions?" she demanded, sudden alarm gripping her. "Did you see him there?"

"I am your friend, Rita. I would do anything to help you," Jim assured her. "I didn't see Roberto last night. What does the boy do?"

"Nothing—not for a long time—but go off on these mysterious trips."

"With Esteban?"

"Not always. Sometimes I think he does and tries to fool me." She wrung her hands desperately. "I am so worried, Mr. Jim. What did you mean this morning when you said the Kinkajou had robbed his last bank?"

"Nothing—nothing, Rita!" Stewart declared fervently. "It was just a foolish boast. If you'll stay here I'll try to locate Roberto. We had words tonight. I might as well tell you, Rita. I was sitting on the veranda. I was the only one there. You know this girl, Carmen? Well, she came out and her actions were so suspicious, that I watched. In a moment, Roberto joined her. I heard what they said. It wasn't of any importance. Something about Esteban looking for him. Roberto wanted to know if he suspected anything."

"Jim!" Rita exclaimed breathlessly. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"It was nothing—and I was afraid you'd take it the wrong way. They saw me at last and accused me of eavesdropping. I—I tried to explain. Certainly she must know where Roberto is. If you'll wait I will speak to her."

"Please, Jim——"

"Smile, then," he begged.

Stewart hurried into the cafe where General Esteban was the center of a gay party. Beautiful girls beamed on him, and the men who were enjoying his hospitality deferred to him as became a potentate.

Esteban wore a strangely detached expression, however. He smoked cigar after cigar and whenever the champagne bottles were emptied he hailed the waiters and loudly demanded more.

"Hooray for General Esteban!" the crowd shouted. A wave of his cigar was the only recognition he gave to their applause. He knew for a certainty that the stranger who had crossed his path was Jim Stewart. He was shrewd enough to surmise that he had a definite purpose in San Luca. That Stewart's purpose concerned him, General Esteban did not doubt for a moment.

As he sat there, surrounded by his sycophants, his thoughts were miles away. The atmosphere in which he found himself was his

elected one and he found thought easier there than alone in his apartment.

He realized that Stewart had to be stopped, but even he hesitated about killing a captain of the Rangers.

Of all those clustered about him only Carmen, the dancer, surmised his train of thought. Repeatedly her eyes came to him and when she looked away there was a gleam of satisfaction in them.

"At last you have a little competition, my General," she cooed. "This Americano and Rita are in a very pretty garden, and the moon is wonderful tonight—and these Gringoes know how to say I love you."

Esteban made a gesture of annoyance and grunted contemptuously.

"What you say means nothing to me," he muttered. "I show you how much she thinks of him. You wait."

He chanced to see Jim regarding him from the doorway. Esteban's mouth narrowed evilly. Jim smiled blandly, and seeing that there was no chance of interrogating Carmen

for the moment, turned to retrace his way to the garden.

"My friends," General Esteban exclaimed dramatically, "you can drink my health now."

They raised their glasses and toasted him loudly. Esteban leaned over and nudged Carmen. "Now I show you what I do to this Gringo," he whispered venomously. To the crowd he said: "Come my friends! I show you how General Esteban make a Gringo look cheap."

The crowd gasped. Esteban got up and led the way to the garden.

CHAPTER XI

IN THE DARK

RITA'S heart sank as she saw Jim returning without her brother. She could not bring herself to confess to him her fear that Roberto was the Kinkajou. She didn't want to admit the suspicion even to herself, but the boy's mysterious conduct these past few weeks had driven her to distraction.

Every time she had brought the matter up, Roberto had put it aside or refused to discuss it entirely. Fight against it as she would, the thought that Roberto was in General Esteban's employ, doing his thieving for him, would not down.

"He ruined my father," she whispered to herself, "and now he is trying to destroy Roberto."

Jim tried to hearten her with a smile.

"I didn't see him," he informed her. "Car-

men was with General Esteban. I'll get her aside presently."

"But I must do something," Rita insisted.

"The best thing to do is to let me take you home," said Jim. "I'll come back and stay here until I locate him."

General Esteban and his guests appeared in the entrance to the garden at that moment. Rita was the first to notice them.

"What are all those people doing here?" she asked anxiously.

"I don't know," Jim declared, a bit alarmed as he recognized Esteban and his guests. He offered Rita his arm and they started to leave. Esteban pretended to be surprised at finding her there.

"Ah, Rita!" he beamed. "I just find out you are here. Wait! I am going to say something."

"Attention, *Señors y Señoritas!*" one of his Mexican friends called out. "Listen, everybody, General Esteban has a very important announcement to make."

General Esteban waited for it to grow quiet. He cleared his throat pompously.

"What you say," he inquired, "if General Esteban give a fine party at his hacienda tonight?"

Cries of "Hooray"—"Fine!"—"Another party!" greeted his suggestion.

"All right," the General smiled. "I give the party on one—what you call consideration—that *Señorita* Rita come as the guest of honor."

He swept off his hat and bowed low before her as old friends in the crowd urged Rita to say Yes. She was confused and helpless for a moment. She was in no mood for a party, especially one given by General Esteban.

"You honor me, General," she murmured. "But I cannot accept. I am too upset over Roberto. If my brother——"

"Don't worry about Roberto," Esteban urged. "I tell you I am his friend. He is all right. Again I ask you, *Señorita.*"

Jim saw Carmen flash a keen, searching glance at him. It told Stewart a great deal and when Rita appealed to him for advice, he whispered to her: "Say you will go. He may know something about Roberto."

Rita nodded. "All right, General Esteban, I will come."

"I am overjoyed." Esteban grinned and kissed her hand. He glanced triumphantly at Carmen. He turned to Jim. "And you, *Señor Americano*—will you accept my hospitality? I can promise you a little surprise. What you say, eh?"

Carmen gazed at Stewart, expecting him to refuse.

"I am particularly fond of surprises," Jim assured him. "I will be delighted to accept your invitation."

Rita shuddered at the undercurrent of their words.

"Good!" Esteban exclaimed. He turned to the crowd. "I will expect you all about midnight. I promise you plenty amusement. For the *Señoritas*—handsome *caballeros*—music of old Mexico—dancing—life—laughter—the best wines in my cellar—moonlight and a big surprise. There is nothing in my humble house that will not be yours for the asking. So prepare to enjoy yourselves. I will see you later."

The crowd applauded enthusiastically. Gen-

eral Esteban bowed to Rita, and accompanied by two of his boon companions, walked over to where his car waited for him.

Carmen found an opportunity to whisper to Stewart.

"Watch your step," she said in the best Americanese. Jim nodded. He was beginning to like Carmen. He and Rita were soon left alone.

"I am afraid for you, Mr. Jim," she mused. "I don't like the look in his eyes when he invited you to come."

"Don't worry about me," Stewart comforted her. "We have got to find Roberto. In the meantime, let us get a bite to eat."

Rita consented to this arrangement and Jim led her proudly into the cafe. The crowd had thinned by now, and under the rose glow of the shaded lamps his eyes carried the message his lips yearned to utter.

"You are beautiful," he murmured. "My Rio Rita——"

Ed Lovett, wearing a worried look, glanced across the cafe and saw them. A low whistle of astonishment pursed his lips as he recog-

nized Jim Stewart. His worried look deepened noticeably.

"I never should have got mixed up in this mess," he groaned. He paid his check presently and slipped out a side entrance, anxious to learn if General Esteban realized that a captain of the Texas Rangers was in San Luca. The information that the General had left for his hacienda did not help matters.

"I'll be the goat if anything breaks," he muttered miserably. "I was a fool to pass that phoney money on to Chick. The little runt will ruin it all."

It occurred to him that it might be the part of wisdom to learn how Chick was spending the evening.

As a matter of fact, Chick Bean was having the time of his life at the moment. He was downstairs in the Grove, a long, cave-like room dedicated to dancing and drinking, surrounded by a bevy of girls. The inoffensive Chick, his meek little face wreathed in smiles, was gorgeously jingled.

"Are you really the Kinkajou?" one of his charmers demanded archly.

"Didn't you hear them say I was?" Chick replied cockily.

"Such nice man like you—it don't seem possible you are the terrible Kinkajou," the girl, Lolita by name, teased.

"Where is he? Where is that wonderful man?" another dark-eyed beauty demanded. "Oh, there you are, papa!" she cried delightedly as Chick tried to hide from her. The girl grabbed him.

"Take it easy," Chick pleaded as the girl reached for one of the buttons that held up the Bean trousers.

"I always keepa this for souvenir of the great Kinkajou," she laughed, and drawing forth a tiny stillete, cut off a button.

"Say, that's the fifth button I've lost tonight," Chick protested.

"If those button is so lucky, I want one, too," Lolita cried.

Chick pushed her away.

"I can't spare any more," he yelled. "Cut it out!"

"Maybe a kiss would do, *papacita,*" Lolita purred.

"Don't you try it," Chick demurred as he wiped his glasses. "Go away, will you? You know you are a very young girl, Lolita."

"You are afraid of one little Mexican girl?" Lolita chirped saucily. "Let me sit down on your knee, *mi corazón, mi tesero, mi vida!*"

The girls howled with delight as Chick struggled with Lolita.

"Stop! Stop!" he cried. "Now listen here, baby, be reasonable. I don't want to hurt your feelings, but I am a married man. What would Dolly say?"

"But just wan leetle kiss," Lolita begged.

"Oh, why was I ever cursed with this sex-appeal?" Chick groaned as Lolita's red lips smacked him on the cheek.

The girls giggled. Lovett had entered in time to see the high jinks that was going on.

"Oh, Lord," Chick moaned. "He'll tell Dolly. I'm in for it now!"

Lovett gazed at him disapprovingly.

"What's the big idea?" he demanded.

"So this is Mr. Killjoy," Lolita exclaimed and made a face at Ed. "So please to meet you!"

The other girls tried to rope Lovett in, but he put them off. Chick got up and started to walk over to Ed. He made a wild grab for his trousers as they began to slip down. "Ed," he groaned, "Get me a nail."

"You'll get a nail, but it will be in a coffin if Dolly finds you," Lovett answered pointedly. "What's all this chatter about you being the Kinkajou?"

"I don't know—I don't know, Ed," Chick sighed pitifully. "It all started tonight."

"Well, if you think you're the Kinkajou," Lovett snapped, "go upstairs. Jim Stewart is there. He'd be pleased to meet you."

"You're always serious at the wrong time," Chick bristled clumsily. "Can't you take a joke. You know who I am!"

"Don't you be mean to my Chickie," Lolita cried as she wrapped her arms around Chick.

Out of the corner of his eye Lovett saw Dolly enter the door. He tried to give Chick the wink, but Lolita had his attention for the moment. The girls got his signal, however, and they left the hapless Mr. Bean to his own embarrassment.

"This is going to be terrible," Lovett muttered to himself. He turned to leave also.

"Don't you run away, Mr. Lovett," Dolly abjured him.

"O-h-h-h!" Chick groaned, and without even bothering to turn around, sank into a chair and closed his eyes.

"Sit up!" Dolly snapped. Chick obliged immediately. "Shut up!" she commanded as Chick started a belated explanation. "You've said enough. I might have known you was one of these small-time sheiks the way you took those cigars out of your pocket the first time I hugged you. Look at you. You're half undressed!"

"Now, listen," Ed pleaded, as the last of the girls disappeared, "this ain't no place to fight. And when people are in a jam like you two—you ought to pull together."

"What jam?" Dolly cried angrily.

"You're a fine lawyer, ain't you?" Chick piped up.

"Don't blame anything on to me. Haven't you told her yet?"

"Told me what?" Dolly demanded hotly, her eyes jumping from Chick to Lovett.

"It's nothing, baby," Chick assured her. "Forget about it. Lovett's crazy."

"Yeh? Well, I insist you tell me what he means!"

"Well, you see——"

"Why stall?" Lovett snapped. "How did I know you'd deceive Dolly?"

"And you call yourself a lawyer!" Chick laughed sarcastically. "You're a fight promoter—not a ham and egg lawyer!"

"I'm still waiting to be let in on the joke," Dolly declared haughtily. "It isn't bad enough to find yourself married to a bigamist and a hot papa, but something else has got to slam you in the eye. Well, I'm no quitter, what is it?"

"My first wife's on her way here," Chick groaned.

Dolly blinked her eyes in the way of a groggy fighter.

"Ain't we got fun," she laughed. The hollowness of it stabbed Chick. She squared her

shoulders and faced Lovett. "Is that on the up and up?" she demanded.

"Um—er, yes." Lovett replied shakily. "I—I advised Chick to beat it."

"You did, eh? Well, we stay right here. As far as I'm concerned, Mr. Bean is hers for the taking."

"Oh, baby, how can you say that?" Chick cried.

"Turn it off!" Dolly snapped. "General Esteban is throwing a big party at his hacienda. He invited me—but I said no. Well, I've changed my mind. I'm going, and I'm going alone!"

She turned stiffly and strode out of the room with a burst of anger.

"I wish I had stayed in Fremont," Chick sobbed.

"So do I," Lovett muttered.

They were so absorbed with their own woes that they failed to notice the peon who glanced in through the window.

The man was searching for some one. He went on from window to window, his eyes roving over the empty grill-room. A low whistle

caught his attention as he turned the corner. He edged toward the black shadow cast by a banana palm.

The peon was one of the three who had trussed up Roberto and taken him away.

In the shadow of the palm a girl waited. It was Carmen. She spoke hurriedly to the man in soft Spanish.

"Tomas and Mariano are watching him," the peon whispered. "General Esteban tell them to kill if he get away."

"The beast!" Carmen muttered. "Roberto did not send me any message, eh?"

The peon shook his head. "I told him I would see you."

"Good," Carmen breathed tensely. "When you go back, tell him for me that he is not to try to escape until I send word." She repeated the message. "You understand, Ramon?"

The man signified that he did.

"Go then," Carmen commanded. "If you want me before morning, I will be at General Esteban's hacienda."

The peon doffed his hat and stole away. Car-

men waited until he had disappeared beyond the stables. Unseen, she stole away toward the garden.

"He will not have long to wait," she murmured with deep resolve. "General Esteban, it will soon be my turn to laugh!"

CHAPTER XII

"YOU ARE MY GUEST"

In a land of many gracious customs, where the role of a gentleman is often an exacting one, it is pleasant to hear priceless heirlooms and princely estates referred to so humbly by their owners. Even General Esteban, with all his crudities, had been pleased to call his hacienda his modest home. That it was one of the best appointed haciendas between Tampico and the border was universally known—as was the manner in which the General had acquired it. But such things are soon forgotten in Mexico—by many, that is.

Back in the days of Porfirio Diaz, the old Rancho Sante Fé had been a place of rare beauty and charm. The buildings, some of them several centuries old, were of excellent Mission architecture. The gardens had been celebrated even then. That their beauty had

been added to since the advent of the General was something of a question. Certainly they had been enlarged and were often the scene of wild revels that must have shocked the ghosts of those who had once trod the gravelled paths.

Openly, and often in secret, the loot from one foray after another had found its way to General Esteban's establishment. One unpleasant guest had been so brash as to recognize a bit of silver last seen in a Texas home. But then, by the order of things, Esteban and his men had what was equivalent to letters of marque and reprisal, and if the hacienda resembled the legendary rendezvous of some pirate of the old Spanish Main, it was only what one might have expected.

In the several hours that had elapsed since he had invited his friends at the Mesa Franceisca to partake of his hospitality, a score of peons had contrived an air of fiesta about the old place. Lanterns had been strung across the patio, the cellars had been ransacked for their most valued treasures, the culinary department had been fired to new zeal by appro-

priate threats and gifts and the telephone enlisted to summon a corps of entertainers from the Club Esteban on the Rio Grande.

It was magic of a sort that he loved to contrive, and as the General moved about cursing this man and praising that one, his ever-present cigar being used as a baton and his dark, gleaming eyes noting details that escaped his servants, he was seen in his happiest and most engaging mood. That beneath his smiling, carefree manner there lurked the thirst for revenge and the determination to erase Jim Stewart from the picture only a chosen few might have suspected.

The night had turned delightfully cool. The moon had come up and brushed the tall poplar and eucalypti with gossamer threads of silver. The whole setting was so peaceful and inviting that it was difficult to believe that only strife, turmoil and chicanery could be born there.

It lacked half an hour of midnight when General Esteban considered the preparations complete. He saw Gonzales arguing with some

of his men on the opposite side of the patio. He called his lieutenant over to his side.

"You know that Gringo at the Mesa Franceisca—the one I invited to come here tonight?"

"*Si, Si!*" Gonzales assured him, his teeth gleaming in an unlovely grin.

"He may be fool enough to accept," General Esteban muttered.

"I know what to do if he try it," Gonzales laughed. "I hope——"

"Me, I tell you now what to do," General Esteban cut him off. "No killing, you understand?"

Gonzales nodded sulkily.

"I have invite him—and he is free to come. The best I have is not too good for this Gringo. But," and Esteban's face hardened in a flash, "I kill the man that lets him leave here! You understand?"

Gonzales began to appreciate his General a little better. He grinned complacently.

The guests began to arrive shortly. They gasped as they saw the preparations that had

been made in their honor. General Esteban was waiting for them in the patio.

"Welcome, my friends!" he called out to them. "My house is yours!"

"It is beautiful, General Esteban!" one of the girls exclaimed.

"Help yourself," he smiled. "It is all yours, *Señorita!*" The music began to swell through the patio. "Dance," he urged the gentlemen, "and when that ceases to amuse you, my friends, you will find my wines delicious."

He had donned a gorgeous uniform for the occasion. As he left to welcome more of his guests, the girl who had so admired the patio let her eyes trail after him. General Esteban had once endeavored to interest her and she had scoffed at his advances. There was keen regret in her eyes now. "I thought he was just one of those garlic eaters," she sighed miserably to herself.

With the arrival of the others, the dancing and entertainment was soon in full sway. The others drank copiously; not General Esteban. He seldom touched wine, although he loved to

buy it for others, especially when they were young and pretty.

Rita had not put in an appearance. It nettled the host. That she would dare to stay away and hold him up to the ridicule of the assembled guests passed belief.

Esteban caught Carmen's eyes on him. He read their thought instantly.

"She will come," he murmured as he passed her a moment later.

"She said she would come," Carmen reminded him with fine inference.

Esteban just nodded and walked to the entrance to the gardens. A vehicle drew up as he did. Dolly got out.

"Oh, you, Dolly!" General Esteban greeted her warmly. "Everybody is asking for you. And Rita—have you seen Rita?"

"She'll be here in a few minutes. She was leaving the Mesa Franceisca as I drove away."

Esteban could not repress a smile of satisfaction.

"It won't do you any good, General," Dolly said breezily. "She had dinner with that American. They had their heads together."

"What you mean, they had their head together?" Esteban demanded anxiously.

"That they're in love. I know the symptoms. Don't be surprised if she marries that American boy."

"Marry that Gringo?" Esteban demanded with a jealous laugh. "No, I don't think so, little Dolly."

Some double meaning in his tone caught Dolly and she glanced up at him sharply.

"No? Why not?"

Esteban smiled inscrutably and just shook his head.

"I am afraid I can not trust you with one little secret, Dolly."

He refused to say more. He offered Dolly his arm and escorted her to the patio.

"My friends, you all know my little Americano Dolly Bean," he announced. The crowd greeted Dolly with a round of applause. "If you are nice, Dolly say she will sing for you."

"Sing that Kinkajou song," a chap called out who had been in the Casa Palomar the previous evening.

Dolly looked to Esteban for approval.

"Sure!" he exclaimed. "Sing him! She's damn clever song."

Dolly was still singing when one of General Esteban's servitors approached him.

"The *Señorita* Ferguson," he informed his master. The General smiled his pleasure and made for the entrance.

"Here at last, my queen of the evening," he greeted Rita. He insisted on helping her down from her carriage. "Every one is here—waiting to see you, Rita, *mia.*"

Rita's face was pale with suppressed excitement. Jim had left her a short way from the hacienda. She knew he would appear in a few moments. That he was in danger could not be doubted. She had begged him to stay away, but Stewart had only smiled at her misgivings. Indeed, nothing short of force could have kept him away from the Rancho Santa Fé this night.

General Esteban held up his hand for the music to stop as he escorted Rita into the patio. His guests called out a warm greeting to Rita. Only Carmen did not join in it. Intuition told her that Rita should not have come.

"Good evening every one," Rita answered. She had a smile of appreciation for the wonders Esteban had worked.

"Your party is wonderful, General," she told him.

"Muchas Gracias, Señorita," he beamed on her. "I do this for you. I am glad you like it."

Rita thanked him prettily. The music began again. Esteban bowed and asked her to dance. Rita allowed him to whisk her away. The General had a bad time of the dance.

"Wait," he exclaimed as he stopped. He raised his voice and called out to the leader of the orchestra. "I can't dance those damn Gringo tunes; play something I know."

He joined in the general laugh that followed his interruption.

"That is better," he grinned at Rita as the music changed. As they circled the dance floor, Rita's eyes continually sought the entrance, wondering what had happened to Stewart.

"I want to tell you little secret, Rita," Gen-

eral Esteban murmured softly. "I find out somethings about your Americano friend."

"Why spoil this wonderful dance," Rita protested. "I do not want to hear anything about him."

"But this is important," he pursued doggedly. "Did he ask any questions about Roberto?"

Rita lost her air of indifference and annoyance.

"Why do you ask, General?" she exclaimed with instant concern.

Esteban was about to reply when the sound of voices reached their ears from the direction of the entrance. Over General Esteban's shoulder she saw Stewart. A servant tried to bar his way as he swept past him.

"Never mind my name," she heard him say. "I am an invited guest."

General Esteban's eyes flamed at this indignity to a guest in his house. They also mirrored his satisfaction at finding Stewart had dared to accept his invitation. He whispered a word to Rita and they crossed the floor to where Stewart stood looking on.

"Good evening, Rita," Stewart bowed. "And you, General. Your hacienda is charming."

"I am glad you like it," Esteban answered cordially.

"I like it better than finding that some one had gone through my stuff at the Mesa Franceisca. Am I indebted to you for that?"

"It was done at my orders," Esteban replied casually.

"At your orders?" Jim laughed unpleasantly.

"Please, Jim," Rita begged, afraid of what might follow. Stewart had the bit in his teeth and refused to take her warning.

"Since when do you give orders for Mexico?"

"I don't bother about Mexico," Esteban flung back at him, "not when I want to find out somethings, Captain Stewart."

"Captain Stewart?" Rita gasped breathlessly. "I do not understand."

"Yes, *Señorita,*" General Esteban continued, "your Americano friend is a captain of the Texas Rangers."

"Is this true, Jim?" she demanded, her look still incredulous.

"Yes, Rita," said Jim. "I'm sorry you had to find it out in this dramatic fashion. I presume it was for this that General Esteban invited me here."

"Captain Stewart, I have always pride myself on being a good host. You are here as my guest and as long as you are in my patio I will treat you as a guest. But after tonight——"

"Well, what will you do?" Jim dared him to say.

"No matter," Esteban answered ominously. "You will see. But I give you the good advice—be careful, Gringo, or mebbe your friends will say when they find you thees time, General Esteban was not so damn tender in the heart."

He bowed as though not an angry word had been said and entered the house. Rita's eyes sought Stewart's.

"Oh, Jim, why didn't you tell me you were a captain of the Rangers?" she murmured. "I don't understand the law so much—but you have no right in Mexico, eh? And General

Esteban, he never forgive what you said to him this morning."

"I couldn't tell you, Rita," Stewart answered unhappily. "I wish I could tell you everything."

"For my sake, go at once. Leave Mexico, Jim! I am so afraid for you——"

"But you trust me, Rita?"

"Of course I trust you——"

"And you promised this evening that some day you would be——"

"Your little chain and ball?" she smiled wanly.

"Ball and chain," Jim smiled. "Smile, Rita darling!"

"Jim, you must not make love to me here—all these people are beginning to stare at us."

"But I am dying to take you into my arms," he breathed warmly.

"Then waltz with me," she murmured.

"But I can't waltz Spanish fashion."

Rita smiled at his naivete.

"Come, I teach you, my Jim," she said.

The deep throbbing of the 'cellos lured them on.

"But hold me closer," Rita whispered.

(Page 163) *(Scene from the Radio Picture, Rio Rita with Bebe Daniels as Rio Rita and John Boles as Captain Jim Stewart)*

"You take my hand and hold it tight—like this," Rita showed him. "Now put your other arm around me, my Jim. There, like that," she sighed softly as Stewart proved an apt pupil. "Now draw me close!"

Stewart was not loath to do as she bade him. They moved away across the floor.

"But hold me closer," Rita whispered, "and rest your cheek against mine. There—it is so wonderful, Jim."

"I love you," he murmured in her ear.

"This is somethings that you don't have to learn, Mr. Jim," Rita said to him.

"Yes, but why waltz?" he queried. "We might be alone."

"There is a garden," Rita informed him.

Stewart nodded. The next time they circled the dance floor he waltzed her out of the patio into the moonlit gardens beyond.

General Esteban saw them go. He glanced around until he saw Gonzales leaning against the veranda that led into the house. He motioned for his lieutenant to follow him. As he made his way to join Gonzales, General Esteban had to pass the table where Carmen sat

sipping a drink. Her keen eyes had seen Jim and Rita leave the patio.

"The *Señor Americano* seems to be enjoying himself," she murmured insidiously.

General Esteban tried unsuccessfully to dissemble the rage he was in. He thought he understood Carmen's interest in his affairs.

"What is it those Gringos say—him who laughs last has the best laugh," he muttered.

"Sometimes those who laugh last—don't laugh," Carmen smiled to herself.

CHAPTER XIII

ADIOS AMOR!

GENERAL ESTEBAN did not waste words with Gonzales.

"You have your men ready?" he demanded sharply.

"The hacienda is surrounded," Gonzales informed him.

"That is very good," Esteban muttered savagely. "We have the showdown damn queeck now! You keep in sight, Gonzales. Don't let him get away."

He waved the man off and immediately repaired to one of the garden entrances. He did not see Jim at once. An angry gasp of consternation started from his lips when he saw Stewart coming down a side path between the long rows of yuccas. Jim saw him about the same time.

"I trust *Señor* Stewart is enjoy himself,"

General Esteban remarked artfully. "You are not leaving my little party, eh?"

"You trust correctly, General," Stewart answered easily. "I am having the time of my life. A cold drink is all I crave."

"There is a buffet just inside," said the General. "The pleasure is mine."

Jim nodded and entered the house. He turned sharply, once inside the door, and saw General Esteban enter the garden in search of Rita. Jim had made a rather careful survey of the place and he slipped out a side door and started to leave the garden. He suspected he was being watched. As he neared the wall he saw three of Esteban's retainers lounging where they could follow his movements.

To test the situation, Stewart approached the peon nearest the gate.

"Have you got a match?" he asked in Spanish.

The man fumbled in his pocket and finally drew out a small pack of old-fashioned sulphur lighters. He was plainly disturbed by Stewart's scrutiny.

"And a cigarette?" Jim added.

The cigarette was forthcoming presently. Jim put in his mouth, handed the matches back to their owner and leaned forward for the man to light a match for him.

"*Muchas gracias,*" Jim mumbled.

The poor peon stood gazing at him a little dumbfounded as though wondering if the Gringo had flim-flammed him. He came out of his abstraction in a hurry as Jim started to pass through the gate.

"It is not permitted that the *Señor* leave," he exclaimed. He had his gun ready to prove it. Jim bowed politely and retraced his steps to the house.

Rita had foolishly tried to avoid the General as he sought her out in the garden. He caught up with her as she walked hurriedly toward the patio.

"Wait, Rita," he commanded peremptorily. "You must listen to me—for Roberto's sake."

General Esteban was sure of his cards now.

"For my brother's sake?" Rita exclaimed. "Are you only trying to frighten me?"

"You should know better," he purred craftily. "I didn't want to say anything un-

til I was sure. Captain Stewart is in San Luca to catch the Kinkajou!"

"What has that bandit got to do with my brother?" Rita demanded gamely, although her knees trembled.

"Rita—Roberto is the Kinkajou," Esteban confided, dramatically.

"You are joking! You do not mean that," she exclaimed.

"Ah, don't make pretend with me," he ground out, his manner suddenly stern and revengeful. "I tell you only to help you. What you think?"

"But my Jim—he couldn't do this——"

"So? Your Jim only make love to you so he can find out about Roberto!"

"That's impossible! I can't believe it," she cried.

"It's true," Esteban repeated. "I am ready to prove it for you."

Rita's eyes darted around the garden wildly, her whole world beginning to crash to ruins.

"You mean he is just using me—trying to make me love him—so I tell him about my brother? Oh, I can't believe it! I won't!"

"Then suppose I prove it," the General drove on mercilessly.

"It can't be true! It can't be true!" she sobbed as the tears fell from her eyes.

"At least you admit this Gringo is down here looking for the Kinkajou—you don't deny that, eh?" argued Esteban.

"Perhaps he is," she managed to answer.

"Then I show you the truth! I will send him a letter—a tip—that Roberto is at the Mesa Franceisca right now. You watch him when he reads that letter. See if he tell you where he is going—see if you can keep him here. If he goes—you will know what brought him to Mexico—and why he made love to you."

"He will not go—I know it!" she replied staunchly. "My heart tells me. Why should he be so cruel to me?"

"There is a big reward for the Kinkajou," Esteban whispered with cunning born of the devil.

"That wouldn't make him do this! He knows I adore Roberto!"

"Well, Rita, *mia,* have no fear—he will not take Roberto!" General Esteban's voice rose

to a nasty whine. "If he tries to leave here—he dies! My men have the hacienda surrounded."

"No! No! You wouldn't dare!" Rita gasped as she clutched his arm.

"Gonzales!" the General called out, deaf to her entreaties.

Gonzales seemed to pop up out of the flower beds.

"*Si, si,* General, I am here," he announced.

"Gonzales, I want you to deliver a note to Captain Stewart. Tell him a peon just brought it. If he tries to leave the hacienda after he reads that note—kill him!"

"How?" Gonzales inquired with a straight face.

"Well, you have your rifles," his master reminded him.

"Oh, no, you wouldn't—you can't do this awful thing," Rita cried, hardly knowing what she said or did.

"If he tries to go—what you care what happens to him? You'll know by then that what I just told you is true." General Esteban turned from her to Gonzales. "Do as I say

—if he tries to leave, shoot him! Come, I give you the letter."

Rita sank helplessly upon a bench.

"You wait here, Rita. I be back in a few minutes," he muttered as he walked toward the house, Gonzales tagging after him.

Stewart had assured himself in a few minutes that he was not to be suffered to leave the hacienda. He had tried several exits and found each one guarded. As he strolled back into the garden, looking for Rita, his face wore a puzzled frown. He wondered if he had overstepped himself in accepting General Esteban's invitation without at least communicating to Wilkins his whereabouts for the night.

It was too late to think of getting word to him now. That General Esteban would dare to detain him, knowing who he was, tended to confirm certain things that Stewart was thinking.

In some way, he decided, Rita must leave for home without suspecting that he was in danger and virtually a prisoner in the hacienda. She was not where he had left her and not until he

had called her name did he see her bowed down on the old stone bench where she had sank.

"What is it, dear?" he demanded anxiously, quick to see that something had happened in his absence.

"Oh, my Jim, I can trust you—always—can't I?" she asked as she lifted her tear-dimmed eyes to his.

"Why, yes," he began when he noticed that her eyes were wet. "You have been crying," he gasped. "What is it? Has Esteban been annoying you? Tell me!"

Rita just gazed deep into his eyes.

"I can trust you," she sighed. "Your eyes are so honest, Jim, when they look into mine."

Jim heard some one approaching on the gravelled walk. It was Gonzales, a letter in his hand. Stewart looked his surprise as the man stopped and handed the note to him.

"Theese letter is for you, *Señor,*" Gonzales explained. "A peon bring in to the gate just now."

"That's strange," Stewart murmured as he took the letter.

"The man say he ees come from the Mesa Franceisca," Gonzales advised.

Cold fear gripped Rita as she watched Stewart read the note. He made no effort to hide the start of surprise that ran through him as he read the contents of the letter.

The handwriting was strange to Jim. The note said that if he wanted to find the Kinkajou—Roberto's name was not mentioned—that he should come to the Mesa Franceisca at once.

"Humph," he muttered as he read it a second time and then carefully folded it and put it away in his purse. Gonzales was still waiting. "Much obliged," Jim added, dismissing him with a nod of his head.

Gonzales withdrew a short distance where he was joined by General Esteban. Esteban raised his finger to his lips as Gonzales was about to speak. The General did not want to be discovered just yet.

"Jim—you are taking me in to supper, aren't you?" Rita queried, trying desperately to make her tone sound casual. Her heart sank as she saw Stewart shake his head.

"I'm afraid I can't dear," he said. "This

letter is important. I'll have to leave at once."

"You mean leave the hacienda?" she gasped, her eyes wide with horror.

"Yes. It can't be helped, Rita. Don't let it matter."

"Why must you go?" she forced herself to ask.

"Why—I can't tell you, dear," answered Jim. "I——"

"But I can tell you!" Rita cried out, her eyes flashing and her body trembling madly. "It's because you are a cheat—a spy!"

"Rita!" Jim groaned. "What does this mean?"

"It means that I am a fool—a little fool," she sobbed. "Don't touch me! I have been blind—mad—not to see the truth from the start!"

This was General Esteban's cue to appear. Rita's voice had reached those in the patio, and a stream of people ran into the garden.

"What is this?" Esteban demanded with a fine show of indignation as he faced Stewart. "Has this Gringo insult you, Rita?"

"Keep out of this!" Jim warned him as he

pushed him out of the way. "I suspect you are at the bottom of it." He turned back to Rita. "What have I done?" he demanded.

"Don't lie!" she stormed. "You are in Mexico to catch the Kinkajou, Captain Stewart. That's why you made love to me. You thought I would give him away!"

Stewart recoiled before the fury of her words. He was left speechless for a moment. The crowd found its tongue however, and cries of spy, ranger and Kinkajou leaped from lip to lip.

Rita turned to them in her excitement.

"Listen to me—all of you," she cried. "Can this Gringo steal in here to make fools of us?"

The crowd was with her almost to a person.

"But Rita," Jim pleaded. "I thought——"

"I know what you thought," she interrupted. "You thought I loved you. I did, fool that I was. But I hate you now!" She hurled the words at him.

"Rita!" Stewart groaned.

"Don't ever mention my name again. I never want to see you," she raced on distract-

edly. Esteban put a protecting arm around her.

Stewart bowed his head. What mattered it now if a bullet dropped him as he leaped over the wall? This was the end. Tomorrow—*mañaña?* Better far no tomorrow than this.

"All I can say is that you are mad," he declared. "All my heart's love is yours, Rita. But you will have your way—and I can not even ask why."

Rita turned away from him. Jim realized how useless it was to plead further.

"Goodbye," he murmured hopelessly. He walked away slowly. General Esteban nodded to Gonzales. Carmen caught the glance. The General sensed it and he glared at her.

Rita's heart was breaking. Could she let him go like this? She glanced after him. He was half way to the gate. She suddenly realized that death lurked behind that gate for him.

"No, Jim!" she screamed. "Not through that gate!"

Jim heard her call. He glanced back. Esteban held her in his arms. Murder flared seething hot in Jim's breast.

"No, it don't end here," Jim muttered through clenched teeth. "I'll square this. I won't be shot down like a trapped rat!"

He leaped at the gate and flung it open. Esteban's men were ready. Their guns roared. But Jim had thrown himself to the ground. He was up and through the startled peons before they could collect their wits. General Esteban cursed madly as he saw him run into the house.

"Gonzales!" He roared. "Get your men into the house!" He barked orders at him in Spanish." Don't let him escape! Shoot him on sight!"

The men, lashed on by Gonzales' vituperation, dashed into the house. General Esteban's guests began to seek a point of safety.

"I guess you believe me now, Rita," the General said to the poor girl.

"I must," he heard her barely whisper.

Suddenly some one in the crowd cried: "Look! There he is on the balcony!"

Rita closed her eyes as she saw Jim dash through the doors that gave on to the balcony. It was a five or six foot drop to the top of the

patio wall. Jim knew he didn't have a second to waste. Over the balcony railing he went.

He landed squarely on the wall. His horse was tethered not far away. As Gonzales and his men ran out of the house, General Esteban yelled: "Fire! Shoot, you fools! Don't let him get over the wall!"

"*Adios!*" Jim called. He waved his hand at the crowd and was gone.

Rita did not know that he was out of danger. She could only see General Esteban's men raising their rifles to fire. With a wild scream she threw herself at them and knocked their guns down.

Esteban pulled her aside.

"Why stand there?" he yelled. "After him! Shoot him as he rides away!"

Rita was too quick for them. As the men rushed to the gate, she dropped the bar that locked it. Esteban was beside himself, a wild beast as Gonzales looked at him for instructions.

Esteban opened the gate. The men poured through and fired a futile volley after Jim.

General Esteban mopped his brow with the

sleeve of his gold-braided uniform. "He got away," he muttered.

Rita breathed a deep sigh of relief. He was gone—never to return—but he was alive, and she had saved him.

"So you have declared yourself," Esteban said to her as the excitement died away. "You *do* love him——"

"I hate him!" Rita answered.

"And you will marry me, my Rita? The hacienda—everything shall be yours."

Rita laughed insanely. Marry him? What a revenge! She was beyond words, but she nodded her head. Why not?

"You will?" Esteban exclaimed.

"I will," she whispered.

CHAPTER XIV

THROUGH THE CHAPPARAL

Morning had dawned before the last guest departed from the Rancho Santa Fé. General Esteban had no thought of retiring. This was a time for action, and he had long ago discovered the virtue of striking while the iron is hot. He ordered his breakfast and ate it with relish.

Already he had made one decision: Roberto had to die.

"Eet's too bad," he told himself. "He is not a bad boy, but I must do it."

He knew Stewart would not cross the line to safety. The man had come to San Luca looking for the Kinkajou. Finding him was now a personal as well as professional matter with Stewart. That he would not try to see Rita at the first opportunity was beyond belief.

With Rita and the Kinkajou to hold him in San Luca, General Esteban felt sure that Jim would not be hard to find. To find him before he had a chance to talk was something else again. It was imperative from Esteban's angle that the cards should be stacked against the man before he could get to Rita. If Roberto's body were to be found and a train of circumstantial evidence pointed to Stewart, the matter would be settled for all time as to whom she would wed.

Roberto had once been of value to Esteban, but that time had also passed. In fact, a definite suspicion against the boy had slowly formed in his mind. Then, too, Roberto knew too much.

This settled the matter and he determined to locate Stewart at once and place him in such a position that the boy's death might believably be fastened on him.

He was perfectly correct in his deductions regarding Jim's whereabouts. Nothing but an official order would have made Jim quit San Luca just then. He fully suspected that the note he had received at Esteban's rancho was

a hoax. A hurried visit to the Mesa Franceisca had confirmed the fact. And yet, the whole incident had really helped him to the extent that he believed he knew the identity of the Kinkajou.

He was not surprised to find that Wilkins and the other rangers had returned to Fremont. He was not prepared, however, for an incident that took place as he was leaving the Inn. The peon who had rubbed down his horse passed his hand over Jim's as Stewart was about to ride away. The man was so careful not to be seen that Jim palmed the note the man handed him without reading it.

"You know Carmen, the dancer, *Señor?*" the man asked under his breath.

Jim nodded.

"She say to tell you it is from her."

When he judged himself free from prying eyes Stewart reined in his mount and read the note. It was in English—or near English.

"Captain Stewart:

"R is in the old 'dobe hut at the San Blas mine—the old mine in the hills above Perdita

Cañon. Three men there. One make no trouble."

The letter was not signed. Stewart smoked several cigarettes over it before he could decide whether or not to pay any attention to it. That the R referred to Roberto was the inference the writer wanted to convey. That Carmen would risk a great deal to aid the boy, he fully realized. That she would willingly inform him where Roberto was to be found that he might effect his release, even though Stewart, in turn, might try to carry him across the line and jail him as the Kinkajou, checked with certain deductions Jim had made about the notorious bandit.

That Roberto was a prisoner somewhere coincided with Stewart's idea at that moment. His own escape that night had convinced him matters were near a showdown. General Esteban had shown his hand. If Roberto interfered with his game, or could be used as a blind or hostage, Esteban would not hesitate to use him. If his death was necessary, it

would be accomplished without a moment's hesitation.

Jim knew where the old San Blas mine was located. It had not been worked in fifty years. The other mine buildings had fallen to ruin long since. The little 'dobe hut itself was disintegrating.

"I'm going to give this a play," Stewart decided at last. "I'll do it for Rita's sake as well as my own."

An hour later he hobbled his horse and climbed up the cañon on foot. The river was only a quarter of a mile away. He was some distance down-stream from Fremont. Still further below him, where the river widened, he could see the floating night-club that was General Esteban's pet diversion.

There were no signs of life about the old 'dobe. Jim managed to get within fifty yards of it without breaking cover. He waited for half an hour without trying to advance. He had almost convinced himself that it was deserted when the pungent odor of boiling coffee drifted across the mine dump to his nostrils.

He glanced at the chimney. Not a sign of smoke lifted from it.

"Using charcoal," he told himself.

Satisfied that the hut was occupied, Jim moved away into the tangled malpais to reconnoitre and watch at a safer distance. Three peons against one ranger were not prohibitive odds, Jim recalled with a smile. The note said one of the three would not make trouble.

Stewart wondered how he was to know which was the harmless one.

The morning wore on. The temperature began to soar, and even in the shade of the overhanging rock under which he had taken up his watch, Jim felt the heat and wondered how long it would be before the men in the hut went to the spring for water or sought the comparative coolness of the tunnel of the old mine. A bench there told him they were in the habit of using the tunnel for just such a purpose.

It was almost nine o'clock before the door opened and a squat little peon came out and gazed down the cañon and across the flat that stretched away toward the town of San Luca. Nothing moved in the vast panorama spread

out before him. He did not expect anything to move, for his glance had hardly been one of anything more than idle curiosity, or better still, just the casual glance that becomes a habit with men living in lonely countries who find a companionship in hills and cañons that passes comprehension.

The peon had a bucket on his arm. The spring for which he was bound was some distance away. He paused to roll and light a cigarette before he shuffled away lazily, happy in that his stomach was full, that there was tobacco to smoke and very little to do—and today and tomorrow in which to do it.

Jim determined to reduce the odds against himself, temporarily at least, by seeing that this particular peon did not return to the hut until he had found Roberto, providing the boy was actually a prisoner in the 'dobe. If the man proved to be the friendly one, so much the better; he would have an ally, then.

Securing a rope from his saddle, Stewart made his way to the spring. The peon was already there. As he started to fill his bucket, Jim got the drop on him. The peon did not

act surprised. He set the bucket down and straightened up unhurriedly. There was even a twinkle in his liquid eyes as he gazed at Stewart.

"I wonder where you hide," he drawled out. "I see you when you come down the cañon 'bout two hour ago. Put those gun down, *Señor* Stewart."

"Oh," Jim murmured as he overcame his surprise. "You have the advantage of me, my friend. What is your name?"

"Ramon," the man grinned.

It seemed very simple, and yet, Jim knew that it might be a trap. There was little by which he could test the man.

"Who is responsible for my being here?" he asked as a feeler.

The peon looked about before answering. "Carmen," he said softly. "Listen, *Señor,*" he continued. "Don't be afraid from me. I am Roberto's friend. He is here in the 'dobe —locked up in the back room. Tomas, the beeg man with the scar on hees chin is Tomas —he has the key. You know eef I want to shoot, I have plenty chance. The bucket is

bright lak' a looking glass. I see you in it long before you speak."

"All right, I'm going to take a chance on you," Jim told him. "How can we get Roberto away?"

Ramon had to roll another cigarette before he could answer.

"Pretty quick when I get back, Tomas and Mariona and me we go over the old tunnel. Cool there. You steal up close, eh? I fix bench so they no see until you almost there. Watch Tomas; he ees not afraid of the devil. He always have his gun, too. Mariano—humph! He don't make much fight, I guess. You savvy all that, eh?"

"O. K.," Jim replied tersely. "When Roberto and I leave, you'll go with us, I suppose."

"No!" Ramon exclaimed sharply. "I stay behind. I mak' pretend try to get you. Mebbe so, you punch me once, eh? Mak' good bluff."

The well-thought-out plan was not born on the instant with Ramon, as Jim very well knew. Jim shrewdly began to suspect that the man was not the peon he pretended to be.

He gave evidence of too much initiative for that.

"We'll try it," Stewart agreed. "But remember this, Ramon, I'll have one eye on you. You make a crooked move, and I'll bust you."

Ramon seemed well satisfied with that arrangement.

"I go now," said he. "Mebbe you come—one hour."

Jim nodded and watched him trek back toward the hut.

The entrance to the tunnel was so located that Jim decided to approach the hut from the rear, worm his way along the south wall and cover the remaining distance as opportunity dictated.

To do this it was necessary for him to cover considerable ground, and it was not until he was within seventy-five yards of the 'dobe that he could see whether the three men were lounging in the tunnel entrance or not.

He heaved a sigh of relief as he located them. The hour was not yet up, and he rested where he was, studying the big man with the scar. Tomas was a burly individual, the typical

Mexican bad man. Mariano was just an ordinary peon. In fact, he was already asleep.

"No need of waiting any longer," Stewart muttered as he saw Ramon glance around as though looking for him.

The chapparal was high enough to conceal his movements and Jim reached the rear of the hut without difficulty. The few yards of open ground that he had to cross was out of the range of the men in the tunnel.

He drew his gun and glanced at it mechanically. There were no other preparations to make. On hands and knees he crawled along the wall. Tomas' back was to him. It was almost too easy. It had been his intention to leap across the ground that separated him and be among them before they could get to their feet. Such a course seemed foolhardy now.

"I'll walk up on them," he decided, "just in case Ramon is dealing from the bottom."

His caution proved to be uncalled for. Mariano still nodded; Tomas continued to smoke with pleasant deliberation; Ramon whittled with a wicked-looking knife.

"Well, *amigos, buenas dias!*" Jim greeted them.

Tomas leaped to his feet like a jack out of a box. He had his gun in his hand by the time he turned. Mariano threw up his hands.

"That's quick work," Jim said to Tomas, "Drop that gun!"

Tomas was not to be bluffed. He lifted his rifle. Stewart's Colt barked savagely. Tomas wrung his hands to shake the sting out of them.

"What's the matter, don't you savvy my talk?" Jim inquired.

Tomas drew in a deep breath of rage and let it rush from his lungs with a loud "whoosh!" His rifle was shattered. He nodded resignedly just as Ramon leaped at Jim, brandishing his knife and hurling a string of curses at him.

For a moment Jim was taken in by this, but the next instant he saw Ramon wink. "Shoot," the man's lips said.

Jim fired again and Ramon yelled and dropped his knife, although Jim's bullet had not come within a foot of his hand.

Stewart recovered the knife.

"Now, *muchachos,* I've got to tie you up. You first, Tomas!"

The big man struggled before he would submit.

"You want me to teach you a lesson, *Jovencito?*" Jim murmured. His tone was cold and chilling. It convinced Tomas.

Mariano gave no trouble. Ramon played his role almost too realistically. Jim had to fetch him a clip on the head before he gave up.

"You boys will find it nice and cool in here." Jim assured them as he placed them well within the tunnel. He found the key in Tomas' pocket.

"*Adios, amigos,*" he grinned, "I'll see you later." Tomas snarled a curse at him. He managed to raise himself enough to be able to glance across the plain that led toward San Luca. A moving cloud of dust that came directly toward Perdita Cañon caught his attention. It made him smile to himself. He knew from the size of the dust-cloud that at least fifteen horses were in the cavalcade that was kicking it up, and by the speed with which it travelled he realized that they were being

ridden at a gallop. The identity of the riders caused him no uncertainty. He pointed out the distant dust-cloud to his companions. They struggled into position to see.

"It's Gonzales or General Esteban!" Tomas grinned his delight. "It will not take them long to get here. That Gringo find out something pretty quick!"

Ramon's eyes rolled a little helplessly. He knew he was too tightly bound to free himself and warn Stewart. He calculated the time it would take the oncoming horsemen to reach the mine. It did not seem that they could arrive in less than twenty minutes. By then, with luck, Stewart and Roberto should be over the hills with an open road ahead of them.

"I'll break this Gringo in two wit' my hands," Tomas growled.

"*Si?* Ramon queried. "*Del dicho al hecho hay mucho trecho!* These Gringos have ways of their own."

CHAPTER XV

THE MEASURE OF A MAN

STEWART was hardly prepared for the reception he got when he threw open the door to the rear room of the adobe. He had come there only to help Roberto, never considering for a moment any idea of spiriting the boy across the line and throwing him into an American jail, even though such conduct would not have been novel enough to set a precedent.

Jim surmised that his days on the Fremont sector of the line were numbered unless the Kinkajou was rounded up. He had been given a free hand in trying to run the bandit down, and he had made a mess of it, apparently. Nothing but a spectacular victory could square matters now. It was really because he understood this so well that he had disappeared from Fremont at a time when he was apparently needed the most.

Since coming to San Luca he had succeeded in proving certain ideas of his to be correct in every sense, chief of which was, that General Esteban was in league with the bandit. Last night's affair at the General's hacienda had proved this to be so. What other reason could he have had for daring to order him killed? As an unknown American in San Luca, Esteban would not have hesitated to put him out of the way for his interest in Rita Ferguson, but to shoot down a Captain of the Rangers was another matter.

To go further, he had definitely established some mysterious connection between Esteban and Roberto. That they had fallen out and Esteban was now either attempting to bend the boy to his will or getting ready to put an end to him because he knew too much, seemed the logical conclusion to draw.

Strangely enough, Stewart's thought in this direction was almost identical with Rita's. Jim could hardly hope that Roberto, by making a clean breast of matters, could avoid incriminating himself. Stewart was positive that Roberto could clear up the whole thing if he

would only speak. For Rita's sake, and on Roberto's own account, Jim stood ready to do anything that lay in his power to help the boy. He hoped that some sense of gratitude for what he risked in rescuing him might sway Roberto. Therefore, he was surprised at the boy's bitter attitude.

"I suppose you come to arrest me," Roberto exclaimed sarcastically, his handsome young face red with anger.

"I am here because Carmen asked me to come," Jim replied. Jim tossed him her note. "You may recognize her hand-writing."

Roberto scanned the note.

"I'm sorry," he muttered. "I beg your pardon, *Señor*. You realize, of course, that you are very apt to pay with your life for this."

"The General ordered me killed last night," Jim smiled. "I'm getting rather used to the General."

Roberto demanded an explanation of what had taken place at the hacienda. Jim's story necessarily mentioned Rita.

"You—love my sister?" Roberto asked as Jim finished.

"She is my life," answered Stewart.

Roberto shook his head as though finding the world suddenly bewildering.

"It is strange," he murmured slowly. "We have a proverb in Spanish, *Señor.* It goes something like this: *'Ne hay mal que bien ne venga.'* Perhaps you understand—out of misfortune comes good."

"It certainly could, Roberto, if you would come clean with me," Stewart replied. "You could clear up this Kinkajou matter in five minutes, if you wanted to. Rita didn't tell me a thing that I didn't already know. I wasn't trying to use her to get at you. What do you say, will you talk?"

"No, *Señor,* I will not," Roberto answered without hesitating a moment. "There are reasons, I assure you. I appreciate your kindness and your courage, but I cannot talk."

"Perhaps it will not be necessary," said Jim. "You won't be safe in San Luca after today. If Esteban didn't hesitate about getting me, he won't bat an eye about bumping

you off. Some things speak for themselves. I know that when the Kinkajou is caught, Esteban will be involved. It all goes back to him. I can't prove that yet, but I'm close to it. Your part in this little game I don't quite savvy. You were on the spot when the bus was stuck up. You were in Fremont when the bank was cracked. You were in the bank. I saw you! I crossed the line immediately and found Esteban hot-footing it to find you. You quarreled and he locked you up while he decided whether he had better bump you off or not. Those are facts, and I warn you that you'll be arrested on sight the moment you put foot on American soil."

"Then you think I am the Kinkajou, eh?"

"I don't know that you are not," Jim answered flatly. "But there is one to think of who is dear to both of us. I've got to stay under cover as long as I remain in San Luca. There will be a price on your head, too. What's going to become of Rita with Esteban determined to marry her?"

"I would kill him first," Roberto muttered fiercely.

"So would I," said Jim. "You understand that Esteban will search your rancho as quick as he can get there after he finds you have escaped."

"But I am not without friends, *Señor,*" Roberto reminded him pointedly. "General Esteban will not find me until I am ready to be found."

"Good! You admit I have done you a favor—now I am going to ask you to do me one."

Roberto bowed. "I am at your service, *Señor.*"

"I want you to get word to Sergeant Wilkins in Fremont that I want him, McGinn, and either Freeman or Kirby to slip over here and meet me at the Club Esteban. Tell them to stick until I show up. You can telephone it over if necessary."

Roberto promised it should be done before noon.

"Well, we'd better get out of here," Jim advised. "Have you got a gun.?"

Roberto said "No." Jim pulled out one of his service revolvers and handed it to him.

"Take this," he said carelessly.

Roberto's fingers closed over the gun. In a flash he had the drop on Stewart.

"Well, if I'm the Kinkajou, why don't I blow your head off?" he asked. "You and Esteban have had trouble. I could saddle the blame on him, eh?"

"Well, why don't you shoot?" Jim asked, his voice steady.

Roberto lowered the gun and a boyish smile of admiration crept over his face.

"Captain Stewart, you are a man," said he. "We may understand each other even yet."

Stewart took a step toward the door.

"Those peons have horses, I suppose," said he.

"Ramon has a horse," answered Roberto. Jim had forgotten Ramon.

"That man is not a peon—is he?" Jim asked suddenly.

"No," Roberto admitted, "Ramon is not a peon."

"Well, we'll have to borrow his horse. I have my own. We'll go over the hills and down to the river. We can separate there. I'll risk

seeing how things are at your rancho. You do as you please, but get that message to Wilkins."

They started for the door then. Before they opened it a cry from the direction of the tunnel entrance reached them.

Ramon had counted the minutes. He knew the riders they had seen crossing the plain must reach the cabin in a few minutes. To warn Stewart and Roberto he had pretended to hurt himself as he struggled with his bonds, although realizing that his voice must carry down the cañon to the others as well.

Roberto started to fling the door open.

"Wait!" Jim ordered. "Let's take a peek through the crack."

"Look!" he cried. "Here comes Gonzales and a dozen or more men! They're not over a hundred yards down the cañon!"

Jim realized that it was too late to use the door. A boarded-up window caught his eye. It was on the side of the hut away from the oncoming men.

"Quick!" he exclaimed as he tore off one of the boards. "Get through the window into the

chapparal. If we're lucky we may get to my horse before they spot us."

They were through the window presently. They crawled on all fours through the sage and mesquite for fifty yards.

"Better get up and run for it," Jim advised. "They'll reach the 'dobe in a second now."

"I set the mesquite afire first," Roberto informed him with a shrewd wink. "She make plenty smoke."

Stewart was forced to admit that in some ways he was a novice in this game compared to Rita's brother.

The greasewood flamed at once. They ran as it began to crackle. They had not taken a dozen steps when a wild cry greeted them from the mine dump. Gonzales himself had seen them. He recognized Stewart. He had a rifle slung under his saddle. Yanking it out frantically, he barked a command to his followers.

"*El Gringo!*" he yelled.

His men saw Stewart and Roberto a second later. They began to pump lead. Their bullets

came uncomfortably close. Roberto caught Jim's arm and pulled him down.

"Wait," he insisted. "The smoke will drive them back in another minute. It is blowing toward them. They be very lucky if they can stay in the cañon."

"You seem to know the desert's little ways, Roberto," Stewart smiled approvingly.

"I love these hills and cañons," the boy muttered, his eyes turning cold and purposeful. "By rights they should belong to me. They were once my father's. Sometimes maybe I tell you how this Esteban ruin us."

It soon became dangerous for them to remain where they were.

"Where is your horse?" Roberto inquired.

"Just beyond the draw that drops to the other side of the head of the cañon," Stewart answered.

"We go, then," Roberto said.

They were able to run in some places. In fifteen minutes they had reached the draw. Stewart's horse was where he had left it.

"He'll carry us double," Jim suggested.

"Only as far as the river," Roberto told him. "They never catch me after that."

It did not take them long to reach the Rio Grande.

"*Adios!*" Roberto waved gaily. "Wilkins will have your message at once. And take care of yourself, Jim!"

CHAPTER XVI

"YOU WILL NEVER MARRY ESTEBAN!"

RITA reached home as the grey dawn slipped up over the eastern hills. Far off a coyote howled dismally. It was a fitting obligato to her troubled thoughts. Timoteo heard her drive into the yard. He roused himself to assist her and put the horses away.

Deep concern engraved itself on his face as he beheld her. In his many years of service on the rancho he had never seen her so distraught. In his time the place had passed from affluence to the tumbledown existence of today. It had mattered a great deal to him, but not for his own sake.

He was an old, inoffensive man whose life had been one of devotion to Rita and her brother. She could not remember ever having seen him angry before. His grizzled face bristled as he stood before her now.

"Has somebody hurt my little flower?" he asked.

"I have hurt myself, Timoteo," Rita replied with an effort. "Go back to sleep."

"But Roberto—you found him?"

His question saved her from asking if Roberto had returned in her absence. At best it had been a vain hope. She went on into the house then.

At breakfast in the kitchen, Timoteo, Pedro and Margarita held their voices down to a low drone as they wondered what had happened to their mistress.

"Tenga v. piedad de nosotros," Margarita wailed as she crossed herself. "She just lies on her bed and doesn't move," she went on. "I try to make her eat a bit, but she tells me to go away."

They went about the few tasks they had to do with faltering steps. When they entered the house, it was on tip-toe. It was as though some one were dead within.

Long after the heat of day had passed, Rita roused herself and came into the patio. Margarita brought her chocolate and biscuits.

Rita smiled wanly and pressed the wrinkled old hand that had served her so well.

"Please—I want to be alone," she murmured. Margarita petted her and waddled back to the kitchen.

An hour passed as Rita tried to bring order to her chaotic thoughts. She feared the worst about Roberto. Men disappeared without a word in San Luca. There was only one man in San Luca who could guarantee his safety. That was General Esteban. Rita recalled with a shudder that she had consented to marry him. Revenge had prompted her promise. She wondered if she could go through with it—even to save her own brother. She felt cornered—trapped.

"But what does it matter?" she murmured, her voice sounding strange and unreal to her own ears. Unconsciously her eyes roamed to the spot where she first beheld Jim Stewart.

She looked away hurriedly, her eyes wet. Why had he done this thing to her? Did love mean so little to him?

His kisses still burned on her lips. But yesterday was already a hundred years away.

"And I loved him so," she sighed involuntarily.

From the patio pool a frog croaked his greeting to the evening. The hills were all blue and purple. She heard the crunching of gravel as some one approached. She did not bother to glance up.

It was Timoteo. He was excited.

"Men come on horseback," he announced. "Come very fast."

It was General Esteban and four picked men. Gonzales did not ride with him. By noon he had been appraised of the fact that Roberto had escaped with the help of Stewart. Gonzales thought he had seen him in a temper before, but he learned his mistake immediately.

"If that Gringo get away," he had finally calmed down enough to say, "I'll kill you for a bungling fool. I warned you to see that nothing happened to Roberto."

Gonzales had tried to make excuses. Excuses were out of order now. In an hour not less than fifty men were stationed along the river to make sure that Stewart did not cross

over to safety. They were also ordered to shoot Roberto on sight. In some way the crime could be fastened on Jim.

These details attended to, he had set off for the Rancho Ferguson with four men who had proven their courage and loyalty to him.

Esteban was certain that either Roberto or Jim would try to get in touch with Rita. He hoped that it would be Stewart. He wanted to see the man torn to pieces.

The long ride had sobered him enough to convince him of the wisdom of forcing Rita to marry him at once. It did not take his nimble mind long to make virtue out of disaster, and before he sighted the rancho he had concocted a tale that promised to serve him well.

Rita had asked Timoteo to find out who came. He was back presently, his old eyes flashing anger.

"It is General Esteban," he declared. "Shall I bar the door, *Señorita?*"

"That would hardly stop him," Rita smiled sadly, not deaf to his loyalty. "Let the General enter. I rather expected him."

The big man of San Luca pulled up his horse with his usual flourish.

"Ah, Rita," he called as he joined her. "We come fast. I hear that Gringo, Stewart, is hiding here."

Of course he had heard nothing of the sort.

"This is the last place to look for him," Rita declared with deadly calm. "He will never come here again."

"So you have not see him, eh?" Esteban queried. "He may be hiding. My men will look!" Without asking permission he waved to his men to search the house.

"I have bad news for you, Rita, *mia,*" he said as his men hurried to execute his command.

"There can be no more bad news," Rita replied sadly.

"No? Well, mebbe it surprise you to know I had helped Roberto to hide. He was at the old 'dobe above Perdita Cañon. He was safe there, I thought. This morning we find him gone. My men see this Stewart take him away."

"What?" Rita exclaimed. "You were helping Roberto?"

"What else, Rita? Roberto and I have always been good friends. I give a thousand pesos to know who tell this Gringo where to find him."

"Can I believe you?" Rita demanded earnestly as she rose.

"Why do you doubt me, *querida?* I tell you by now this Gringo has your brother across the line. My men are spread out along the river. They don't find him. I heard he was seen near here. That's why I come so quick."

His men came back to report they had not found a trace of the American.

One of the men was Tomas. Esteban called him over.

"Tomas, you were at the mine. Tell us what happen."

Tomas had been well coached. He gave Rita a graphic description of Jim's attack.

"When he come out of the house he had Roberto's hands tied," he lied. "Quick he set the mesquite afire. We can not follow at once.

When we go, he is riding for the river with Roberto."

Rita sank back into her chair. She told herself this was only what she might have expected from Stewart. He was an American—and Americans didn't give up until they succeeded.

But why shouldn't he have done this she asked herself? Hadn't he already proved that she meant nothing to him? What was there to stop him from taking Roberto back to Texas.

"Don't worry," General Esteban muttered, shrewdly divining her thought. "I'll bring Roberto back if I have to take him right out of the Fremont jail. You leave somethings to me, Rita."

"Help him," she begged. "He is all I have left."

"All? What about me?"

"And you," Rita added weakly.

Esteban made his men withdraw.

"You have not change your mind about marrying me, eh?" he asked with what passed for tenderness with him.

Rita shook her head slowly.

"I keep my promise," she whispered.

"Then why wait?" Esteban demanded eagerly. "I don't want to waste a day—they are so few. I have grand idea, Rita. We get married at the Club Esteban. I make that barge a flower garden for you! Already I make telegram to San Antonio for wedding dress for you. You should see such beautiful things I get for you!"

Rita failed to enthuse.

"Why not be married tomorrow night? What you say?" General Esteban hurried on.

"The sooner the better," he heard her whisper.

He started to kiss her and stopped. Some sixth sense must have warned him for she would have killed him had he persisted. Esteban was philosophical about it. He had waited a long while for her; a day or two more could not matter.

"I leave Tomas and Manuel near to protect you," said he. He was really leaving them there to watch her. "I see you tomorrow, Rita, *mia.*"

She only nodded and continued to stare at the pool. General Esteban bowed and joined his men. A whispered word with Tomas, and he rode away with the others. As he did, a pair of eyes peered over the edge of the roof at him. Stewart had been lying up there for an hour.

Tomas and Manuel lounged about the gate until they were called in to supper. Rita still sat bowed down in the patio. Jim decided to risk capture for a word with her.

Rita was not aware of him as he dropped from the roof and circled around the patio to where she sat.

"Rita," he whispered softly.

She leaped to her feet—that voice!

"Jim!" she cried as she saw him. There was love in her eyes. Her lips trembled. And then she remembered.

Stewart winced as he saw the wave of suffering and misery that swept over her face.

"Why do you come?" she gasped haltingly.

"To tell you he lied. Roberto is free."

"Prove it," she demanded.

"I can't prove it like that, Rita. Isn't my word enough?"

"Your word? Your word!" The bitter irony of it. "Go! Go before I call Tomas!"

Jim bowed resignedly.

"I'll go—since you wish it. But remember this, Rita—you will never marry Esteban—not as long as Roberto and I live!"

CHAPTER XVII

THE CLUB ESTEBAN

In her day the *S. S. Coral Belle* had run the gamut of most ships. Originally built for the Central American banana trade, she had passed on to freighting case oil out of Vera Cruz and in turn to just a tramp steamer on the Gulf, her old engines gradually falling apart and her owners changing with every tide.

For two years she had lain in the mud off the Santa Inez breakwater. It was about that time that General Esteban rose to power in San Luca. The idea of bringing the old hulk up the Rio Grande and transforming her into a floating night club had appealed to him. He supplied the money and his partners the imagination.

In her present shape there was nothing to hint of the vicissitudes of her long and unglori-

ous years of wandering. Her rigging had been cut down, the main deck transformed into a gorgeous dance floor and the deck-house made over into a cafe, where evening breezes fanned the palms and vines that invited romance and sleek, obsequious waiters slipped noiselessly to and fro.

On gala nights, multi-colored lights outlined the Club Esteban. Dreamy music floated over the brown waters of the river. Gay ladies and their debonair escorts gave it a cosmopolitan air.

General Esteban often entertained there. At one time he used to send a launch over to Fremont to ferry his guests to the club. Prohibition officials had put a stop to that. Now automobiles brought them. He was at a loss to understand what difference this arrangement made to the land of the free.

Esteban had come himself to make arrangements for his wedding party. He ordered his partners to outdo themselves. Everything had to be bigger and better than anything they had previously contrived. He laughed at expense. The more it cost the better he liked it.

The miracle had been performed. As evening fell on the following day, the Club Esteban glowed in new glory. The General had spent part of the afternoon in Fremont. He was in a merry mood, inviting his guests promiscuously and seemingly not having a care in the world. It did not stop him from making certain guarded inquiries about Jim Stewart as well as Roberto Ferguson.

He breathed a sigh of relief when he crossed back into San Luca. He surmised that it might be some time before he would dare visit Fremont again. A hasty visit to the Mesa Franceisca completed his business for the day and he repaired to his hacienda to dress for his wedding.

He had informed Rita that his car would come for her. By this arrangement he wisely figured that matters stood as they had when he left her. To have seen her again would have meant giving her another opportunity to change her mind.

Esteban had invited Ed Lovett to celebrate with him. Lovett had promised to bring Chick and Dolly. The Beans were still at the Mesa

Franceisca. They had patched up their differences, but Chick was wallowing in the slough of despondency.

On his return to sobriety he had found himself possessed of the bills being advertised by the Fremont bank. He was afraid to say anything to Dolly and doubly afraid to return to Fremont. In his anxiety over the money he had overcome his fear of being jailed as a bigamist. He was most anxious to see Lovett. So when Ed telephoned him to meet him at the barge he had eagerly agreed to the arrangement. As a consequence, Dolly and he were the first guests to arrive. Lovett had come aboard a few minutes later.

"Well—friends again!" he exclaimed as he greeted the Beans.

"No thanks to you," Dolly chirped up. "I'd be a widow this minute if Chick had listened to you."

"I was only quoting the law," Lovett replied. "No hard feelings?"

"Not a one," Dolly answered with a smile. "I'm here to enjoy myself. The General has certainly fixed things up gorjeejusly. Chick's

idea of showing me a good time was to start our wedding trip in a motorcycle. You can't beat that boy."

Chick was not a bit loquacious. At the first opportunity he got Lovett aside.

"Ed, somebody planted a lot of stolen money on me," he declared, seriously. He glanced around again to make doubly sure they were alone. "Didn't you change some money for me?"

Lovett hesitated over his answer and appeared to be trying to recall whether he had or not.

"'Why—I might have," he said. "How much?"

"Ten grand."

"Ten thousand dollars? Say are you kidding? Where'd I get ten thousand dollars?"

"That's so," Chick sighed. "I hadn't thought of that. Why did I get so drunk?"

"You got that money on you now?" Lovett asked.

Chick nodded guiltily.

"Why don't you throw it away," suggested Lovett.

"Oh, no, Ed! It's good money—American money."

"Well, you don't want to go to jail, do you?"

"Oh, Lord, no," Chick groaned. "It's that money the Kinkajou stole from the Fremont bank."

Lovett whistled a very good imitation of genuine surprise.

"That's why the girls were calling you the Kinkajou."

"Were they?" gasped Chick. "I still have the whole ten thousand. I haven't showed it to anyone—not even Dolly. Can't you suggest something?"

Lovett was doing some very rapid thinking.

"Put it on that chair," he whispered. "And go back to Dolly. Maybe something can be worked to fix this up. You never had it, mind you, and you don't know what happened to it. You got that straight?"

Chick was willing to take any chance. He left the money on the chair and walked away with relief. Lovett promptly pocketed the bills. This was better luck than he had any reason to expect. Chick never could squawk

if Lovett told him later that he had destroyed the money—a proceeding that was farthest from Ed's mind. He got up jauntily a few minutes later and started across the deck. To his surprise he saw Wilkins and McGinn seated at a table with two American girls. Whether they had been observing him or not he could not decide. He managed a smile, however, and greeted the Rangers warmly.

"Boys, I know you're good fellows and all that, but this is the General's private party tonight. Before it's over there's going to be a wedding. You boys will have to go ashore."

"I don't care whose party this is," Wilkins replied breezily. "This is a public cabaret and my money is as good as the next man's."

"This is an outrage," McGinn cut in. "If this barge was on the other side of the river—"

"You'd pinch it in a minute," Lovett chuckled. "Be yourselves, boys. Humor the General for once."

Wilkins gave McGinn a knowing glance.

"We don't want to stay where we're not welcome," he grumbled. "Come on, Mac, we'll go back to town."

"Now you're being regular," Lovett assured them. "Leave the check; I'll pay it."

"Thanks," Wilkins grinned. "The next time we board this tub it will be with a warrant."

Lovett felt vastly relieved as he saw them go ashore. A woman, a stranger to Ed, passed them on the gangplank. She bowed to him.

"Pardon me," she said, "can you tell me where I will find a gentleman by the name of Lovett, a lawyer?"

"Madam, you have the honor to be speaking to that broad-shouldered chap right now. What can I do for you?"

Ed ran his eyes over her. He decided she was not at all hard to look at.

"Really?" she queried. "I am Mrs. Bean. I tried to find you in Fremont. I understand you represent my husband."

Lovett felt a chill run down his spine. "I'm as good as a clairvoyant," he groaned to himself.

"You mean to say, Mrs. Bean that you have come all the way to Mexico to make trouble for your husband?" he demanded pompously.

"Yes! And when I meet him he'll know it. I'm not going to let Chick put anything over on me."

"Now listen, Mrs. Bean," Lovett pleaded as he offered her a chair, "be reasonable, take my advice and go home and collect your alimony."

"Alimony?" Mrs. Bean laughed contemptuously. "That means nothing to me any longer. My uncle just died and left me three million dollars."

"How much?" Lovett gasped.

"In the neighborhood of three million dollars."

That was Lovett's favorite neighborhood. He changed his tactics at once.

"Why do you waste your time thinking about a man like Chick? Don't you realize there are a million men who would gladly make you their slave—I mean be your slave? Don't you know? Can't you realize that? You are a beautiful woman. Just to look into your eyes makes me want to help you."

Lovett called the waiter and ordered refreshments.

"I'm sure I can fix everything up," he said confidentially.

"I think I can read you like a book," Mrs. Bean smiled coyly.

"Well, if you can—better skip a few pages," Ed laughed.

As Mrs. Bean began to unbend and Lovett endeavored to make himself solid with her, he saw Chick and Dolly cross the deck and take the next table. He tried to wig wag a danger signal to Chick, but that worthy failed to get it. At least Mrs. Bean had her back to them.

"You look as though you've seen a ghost," Mrs. Bean told Lovett. "What is it?"

"Nothing at all—nothing at all, I assure you," he exclaimed.

Chick half turned at this.

"You know you have such style—and refinement," Ed ran on.

Chick overheard him.

"Who's all that style and refinement Ed's talking to?" he asked Dolly.

"A stranger to me," Dolly replied disinterestedly. "Don't turn around," Dolly warned. "She's looking."

"Who is that?" Mrs. Bean demanded of Lovett.

"Just an insignificant little runt," Ed whispered under his breath.

"I wish he'd turn around," Mrs. Bean exclaimed, raising her voice.

Chick wheeled as though he were on springs.

"My God!" he groaned. "It's the war department!"

"What do you mean?" Dolly exclaimed. "You crazy again?"

"Let's go home," Chick groaned. "I don't feel well, Dolly."

He got up and took a step or two. Mrs. Bean number one whirled and confronted him.

"You!" she screamed.

"Why—why Katie!" Chick gasped desperately.

"Say—what is this?" Dolly demanded sharply as she glanced from Katie to Chick. "Hadn't you better introduce us, Chickie dear?"

Chick held his throbbing head. "This is where my past meets my future," he groaned. "Dolly, this is Katie, my first wife."

Dolly did a surprising thing for her by bursting into tears.

"So this is the poor girl you've chosen as your next victim," Katie exclaimed as she tried to mother Dolly. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Chick."

Chick sniffled suspiciously. Katie ignored him as she petted Dolly.

"You're so sweet and lovely," she whispered, "that I've changed my mind about prosecuting Chick. You can have him, Dolly, and if he starts anything—just let me know."

"You're wonderful, Katie," he sobbed. "I never knew you wanted to hang on to me."

"Hang on to you?" Katie demanded icily. "I just wanted to lose you legally."

"Well, I can fix that up," Lovett explained. "Everybody will be satisfied. Let's not ruin the General's party by referring to it again tonight. Will you remain as my guest, Katie?"

"Oh, Mr. Lovett!" Katie smiled.

"Well, let us take a little walk," Ed said.

"See you later, honey," Katie called back to Dolly.

"Isn't he a fast worker?" Chick mut-

tered as he and Dolly stared after them.

"And isn't she sweet?" Dolly exclaimed.

"She sure is!" Chick admitted. A quick flash of jealousy leaped across Dolly's face.

"You're not sorry I'm going to be the only Mrs. Bean, are you, Chickie?"

Chick took her into his arms.

"Of course not, baby," he crooned. "Let us go up in the bow where we can be alone."

"What's that?" Dolly gasped as she saw a disheveled man crawl over the railing. "He looks like a ghost."

"It's Roberto Ferguson!" Chick exclaimed. "He is a sight!"

Roberto knew they had seen him. He beckoned for them to come nearer.

"What are you doing here, Roberto?" Chick asked. The boy put his finger to his lips.

"Never mind about me. Is Rita here yet? She's supposed to come."

"Why, she is going to marry General Esteban," Dolly informed him.

"She is mad," the boy muttered. "She thinks she is doing it to save me—that I am the Kinkajou."

"What?" Dolly and Chick exclaimed together.

"Were you mixed up in the bank robbery?" Dolly demanded aghast.

"Yes," Roberto answered, "and you'll know just how before the night is over."

Other guests were arriving. Roberto knew he could not remain there unseen.

"If you want to keep out of trouble—do not tell anyone—not even Rita—that you saw me here. Go back to the cafe."

He waited until they were gone. A low whistle broke from his lips then. Out of the blackness of the river a small skiff approached the barge. Four men were in it. Roberto spoke to them in his own tongue.

Like grey ghosts the four men crawled up the cable that held the barge to the shore.

"Separate," he told them. "Be ready when I call you."

The men nodded that they understood. They slipped away silently. Roberto waited only a second or two and dropped into the skiff and paddled off.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE RIVER OF DREAMS

Gonzales had not found a trace of Roberto or Stewart, but he had won General Esteban's approval by turning out a dozen soldiers in better looking uniforms than had been seen in San Luca in years. They were to serve as an escort for the General.

Esteban, gorgeously resplendent, stepped into his car with the importance of a potentate as Gonzales' detail lined up beside the motor.

In Mexico, uniforms were usually worn only by officers, and the matter of detail left to the individual. General Esteban had always subscribed to this popular custom, but as he surveyed his men now a new sense of importance set him aglow and he made a mental reservation to set a precedent in this matter in the near future.

He had no desire to reach the barge before

Rita arrived. Accordingly, he stopped at the Mesa Franceisca and managed to wile away half an hour. The place was almost deserted. He asked after Carmen. José informed him that she had already left for the Club Esteban.

Her whereabouts mattered very little to the General, other than that he wanted to have the satisfaction of gloating over his success with Rita for her benefit.

It was after eight-thirty when he reached the barge. His guests received him with the acclaim he loved so dearly. He strutted up the gangplank as though he were an admiral come to receive the sword of a vanquished foe.

Gonzales placed his men about the boat in advantageous positions. Ostensibly they were only part of the picture. There were one or two guests present who knew better. Carmen was one. Her keen eyes sought out the men. She felt they might have been better placed in case of an attack.

Rita had not arrived as yet. Esteban greeted the announcement with a laugh.

"This is one night when a man must not be impatient with the woman he loves," said he.

"Come, my friends, let me show you the supper-table."

"It is perfect!" a girl declared. "You are a genius, General."

"In more ways than one," he replied with subtle inflection. "Rita will be here soon. In the meantime there is no reason why we should not have music. Come, enjoy yourselves!"

Esteban had had one of the few remaining staterooms decorated especially for Rita. It was a bower of flowers. Over a chair was spread the wedding-gown he had purchased for her. It was a ravishing creation of silver and white tulle.

It was well enough to jest about impatience, but as the minutes passed and Rita did not appear, Esteban's good humor began to vanish. At last he sent a rider out on horseback to see if she could be sighted. When at last the man returned with word that Rita was arriving, Esteban breathed more freely.

He had Gonzales line up his men to salute her.

"Welcome my bride!" he exclaimed with a flourish as Rita came up the gangplank. He

offered her his arm and marched down the aisle Gonzales' soldiers formed for them.

"I have done all this for you, Rita," he told her. "I hope you like it."

"It seems lovely," she replied. The strain under which she labored was apparent. "Can I rest somewhere, General?" she asked.

"A room has been prepared for you," said he. "Come, Rita. I have seen to everything. The padre is already here."

"But the banns—they have not been read. We can not be married tonight."

"No? Ha! Ha! For what am I a General in Mexico if such little things like reading the banns can not be arranged to suit me? I tell you everything is ready. Look?"

He opened the door to the stateroom.

Rita swayed dizzily as her eyes fell on the wedding gown. She ran her hand over it.

"You like it, eh?"

"It is beautiful," she barely whispered. "It is too beautiful for me."

"Why you say that? You are the most wonderful, beautiful thing in the world. That

dress is lucky she belongs to you. How long before you be ready, *querido mia?*"

"Oh, give me time to think," Rita pleaded disconsolately.

"Does love need time to think, Rita? That Gringo is not still in your mind, eh? You are not letting him stand in the way when I want to marry you so I can protect Roberto—tell me I am mistaken!"

"Roberto," Rita sighed, her voice tired and lifeless, "you have not seen him?"

"No. I was in Fremont this afternoon. He is not in the jail."

"You promised to bring him to me."

"Tomorrow, Rita! That Stewart, he warn me not to come to Fremont. But I go just the same. General Esteban is not afraid of any man. Tomorrow, when you are my wife, we will find your brother. I go now. I send the maid to you. She will tell me when you are ready."

He knelt and kissed her hand before he left. Rita sat staring at the spot his lips had touched. It was like a stain.

The maid entered presently. Rita had not moved.

"Bathe my hands," she said.

Mechanically she permitted the girl to dress her and place a new comb, a gift from Esteban, in her hair.

"You are beautiful," the maid said humbly.

Rita appeared not to hear.

"You may tell the General I am ready," said she.

The maid bowed and withdrew.

Rita struggled to her feet and crossed to the ship's railing where she let the breeze fan her fevered face. She did not hear a window open in a porthole a few feet away.

The hold of the barge was used only as a storeroom. The portholes had never been boarded up. Stewart had managed to get below decks early that morning, determined to wait there until the wedding was about to take place.

From his present point of vantage he had been able to keep a careful check on what went on above him. When he tried to open the door that opened onto the stairs he found it locked.

It did not deter him. He found a length of rope, tied a noose in it and proceeded to force open one of the porthole windows. He was engaged in trying to loop the rope over a stanchion as Rita waited for General Esteban.

Jim was unaware of her nearness as he made repeated casts. At last the noose settled over the post and he crawled up hand over hand.

When he reached the deck he was not ten feet from Rita. He recognized her at once and called her name.

"Jim!" she cried. "Why did you come?"

He ignored her question.

"What are you doing in that dress?" he demanded, his mouth straight and forbidding.

"It is my wedding gown," Rita replied haughtily. "I am going to marry General Esteban tonight."

"Rita, you are mad! You do not love him!"

"What I do does not concern you," she murmured bitterly.

"Then I'll make it concern me," said he. "I will kill him before I will let him make you go through with this. Look at your eyes! I don't see there the happiness a girl feels on

her wedding night. I know you despise that beast. You are doing this only to hurt me and out of a mad hope that you will help your brother. I know you will not listen to me. Esteban will have to listen."

He started away but she stopped him.

"Where are you going?" she demanded brokenly.

"To make that bandit crawl."

"Don't try it—please! His men are all over the boat. They are watching for you. He knew you would try to see me. You will be killed. They won't miss you this time."

"And does it matter to you what happens to me?"

Rita trembled and had to catch a stanchion for support.

"I—I forgot who you were," she murmured. "You are still the spy."

"I am not looking for Roberto tonight. You know I love you better than anything in the world—and you love me, Rita. You proved that when you stood between me and death. Say you won't marry this man!"

He came close to her. Rita put up her hand to guard him off.

"It is too late," she sobbed. "I—I can't stand this. Go! Go!"

Stewart saw her stagger. He caught her in his arms and held her tenderly.

"Jim!" she cried. "My Jim!"

Their lips met. Somewhere a door opened. Rita heard it.

"Go—go before he sees you," she begged. "For my sake, hide—quick!"

Had not Esteban backed out of the door as he struggled to get away from his guests to go for the bride, he would have come face to face with Stewart.

"Be patient, my good friends," he called back to them. "I bring my bride in just wan minute."

Jim's kiss had acted as though it were some lifegiving anodyne to Rita. She had found new courage. In some way she determined to delay the ghastly farce in which she was to be the sacrifice.

Esteban had never found her so ravishing, so utterly desirable.

"Ah! my beautiful one," he exclaimed eagerly. "I have waited so long for you. And your gown—from Mexico City to San Luca I tell you you could not find one to compare with it—and no one to wear it as you do."

"I am sorry I am so slow, General," Rita apologized, "but my head—I am excited, I guess—I feel so faint."

He found a chair for her.

"Wait, I get some wine," he exclaimed. He ran to the cafe. "A pint of the very extra best champagne!" she heard him call out.

Rita knew she would have only another second with Jim before Esteban returned. She sprang from the chair and whispered his name.

"Promise me you will go," she begged as he joined her.

"And leave you here?"

"I can take care of myself. It's you, Jim —I'm so worried about you."

"Oh, why, dear?"

"Are you going to make me tell you?" she asked defensively.

"If it's what I'm waiting to hear I don't care how many of Esteban's men are around."

"But you know now without my telling you. If anything should happen to you—it would kill me, Jim."

She heard General Esteban coming.

"Please——" she begged.

"I can't go, Rita. I am not alone here. Two of my men swam the river. They are hiding here now."

"But only three of you—against twenty!"

Jim caught her hand to emphasize what he was about to say.

"We are going to cut the cable that holds the barge," said he. "The current sets across the river toward the Texas shore. The barge will drift across. We'll do the rest if you'll keep Esteban busy."

He didn't wait for her answer. He gave her a gun.

"Signal with it if you need me. Look out!"

Rita sank into her chair and managed to hide the gun before General Esteban arrived with the champagne.

"My beautiful one," he cooed, "this will bring the roses to your cheeks."

Rita sipped it slowly. She let her eyes roam

about the deck of the barge. They came to rest on the bow. The shadows were deep there. A noise ashore momentarily drew the attention of Esteban's guards. In that fleeting second Rita saw Stewart slip past them toward the bow.

"You think you feel good enough to go inside, Rita?" Esteban questioned a little impatiently. "They are crazy to see you."

"Give me just a few minutes more," she pleaded. "I feel better already."

Again her eyes sought the bow of the boat. She knew Jim was there. She wondered how long it would take him to cut the cable. Suddenly the shadows that veiled the bow were slit with a streak of red flame. The roar of a gun stopped the music with a discordant crash.

"What was that?" Esteban cried loudly, reaching for a weapon and finding nothing but his pretty and harmless dress sword with which to defend himself.

Rita felt herself swooning. She had begged Jim to go.

And now this——

CHAPTER XIX

THE ROAD TO ROMANCE

STEWART was just going over the rail when one of Esteban's men had chanced to see him. The man had fired instantly without bothering to take aim. It was a national affliction for which Jim thanked his lucky star. Had he been a second sooner, he would have escaped detection, cut the cable and waited for the current to do the rest.

As it was, he got a toe-hold in the hawse hole through which the cable ran and clung there waiting for the worst to happen and sawing away at the cable.

The guard who had fired at him opened his mouth to yell a warning to his fellows, but it never left his lips. Out of nowhere Wilkins' fist crashed into the man's jaw and he slumped to the deck

Jim had communicated his plans to his men.

Wilkins was under orders to further these plans no matter what happened. He knew why the man had fired. He also knew what Jim was attempting to do at that very moment. To draw attention from him until his task was completed was Wilkins' first thought. Therefore, he waited where he stood, knowing the next few seconds would bring the pack down on him.

From a dozen directions men swarmed at him. Cries of "There he is!"

"Shoot him!" rolled across the deck. Wilkins took one look and ran to the rail and dived into the murky river. General Esteban's lavish display of lights made it impossible for those on the barge to see clearly across the blackness of the water.

The man Wilkins had felled came to. His story checked with what the others had seen. It was too late now to apprehend the Ranger. Gonzales received his usual tongue lashing for this unpleasant incident. The matter ended there and General Esteban went back to Rita.

Carmen had reached her side a moment after

the General had run down the deck to learn the cause of the shot.

"He got away," Carmen whispered. "I saw him go over the rail. This man they chased was not the Captain."

Rita heard her as in a dream. She did not even pause to wonder why Carmen should take it upon herself to inform her that Jim had not been killed, or what her interest in the matter might be.

"You will say nothing," Carmen added as she started to walk away.

General Esteban's mustachios were bristling as he hurried back to Rita. There should be no more delay, he vowed. The wedding would take place at once. He checked himself, however, as he noted the pallor of her face. He caught up one of her hands.

"Rita, you are like ice," he exclaimed. "Put on your mantilla. Let me help you."

She tried to protest, but he grabbed the shawl and held it up for her. As he did, Jim's gun fell to the deck. Esteban snatched it up quickly, and examined it.

"What's this?" he roared. "Captain Stew-

art's gun, eh? You have seen him—he is on the barge?"

"No, no," she answered weakly. "He gave it to me days ago."

"That's a lie! It is not true!' Esteban snarled. "My men said they saw a Ranger. Gonzales! Gonzales!"

His cry echoed up and down the deck. Soldiers and guests came running.

"That spy, Stewart, is on the barge," he yelled to his men. "Find him—bring him here —I want to see him die." He turned to his guests. "My friends, go back to the cafe. I settle this matter in a hurry."

They moved away slowly.

"Rita, this Gringo laugh at me the other day," he muttered angrily when they were alone. "Now I laugh. When my men bring him here I want he should see you flutter in my arms like the leetle pigeon. Mebbe I let him see us get married."

Rita covered her face with her hands to shut him from her sight. Esteban forced her hands down.

"Come," he insisted, "let me take you in my arms."

Rita fought him off.

"Let go of me!" she cried. "I despise you, you beast!"

Esteban's cruel mouth straightened and into his eyes came the steely glitter of the killer. Before he could speak, an interruption came from the rear of the deck-house. Esteban whirled to find Roberto advancing upon him.

"Take your hands off my sister, you damn thief!" Roberto burst out.

"Roberto!" Rita gasped as she saw her brother grab Esteban by the throat.

"I ought to choke the life out of you!" the boy cried.

Gonzales' eyes popped as he came back to report to the General and saw Roberto strangling him.

"Seize him! Take him off!" Esteban managed to shout.

The struggle was of short duration. Gonzales tied the boy's hands.

Esteban straightened his uniform and pulled

his sword back so that it could not trip him. He was violently agitated.

"Watch him carefully," he warned. "That man is the Kinkajou!"

"I am not the Kinkajou—and you know it!" Roberto flung back at him.

Gonzales raised his fist and dared the boy to say another word.

"There is plenty of evidence," Esteban continued. "I am the boss here; I make the law. If you have anything to say—tell it to Lieutenant Gonzales—I don't want to hear it! Take him away."

"And you told me you would protect my brother," Rita cried out.

"And you told me you were through with this Ranger," Esteban retorted. He nodded to Gonzales to waste no more time.

"But you are not actually going to kill my brother—without a trial?" Rita was only trying to delay matters. Where could Jim be? Something must happen to save Roberto if she could only gain a few minutes' time.

"Since you made this an issue between us, I am," General Esteban declared decisively.

Rita threw herself at him, clutching his arm madly.

"I'll never see Captain Stewart again," she promised. "I'll marry you—I'll do anything you want if you'll spare my brother."

Roberto did not understand her purpose.

"You will not marry him to save me," he cried. "If I die, Esteban will die with me."

His threat made the General laugh.

"Get the padre," Rita insisted. "Pay no attention to Roberto."

Lovett dared to suggest that the General listen to reason. If Rita was willing to marry him, why not take her at her word.

Esteban silenced him with a ferocious look. He had manoeuvered for days to get the whip hand over Rita. He had succeeded at last, and he had no intention of being hurried out of his pleasure.

Stewart was keenly alive to what was taking place on the after deck. He had cut the cable minutes back. The current had soon borne the barge into mid-stream. Gradually it veered toward the Texas side of the river. Jim gazed at the approaching shore, trying to see if he

could discover any signs of the men he knew were waiting there to rush to his aid.

It was all he could do to restrain himself as he saw Rita pleading for mercy, her heart breaking. At last a slight tremor, unnoticed by the others, passed over the barge. Jim knew the vessel was aground on American soil.

The attention of every one on board the boat was so fixed on the drama taking place at the other end of the deck that Jim did not hesitate to come up over the rail.

He had not heard a sound from the direction of the shore. He was about to inject himself into the situation on the barge without assistance, other than he might draw from McGinn, who was still aboard, when a low whistle reached his ears.

Stewart answered it at once. He could hear horses splashing through the water. It was not necessary for him to wait any longer. He crept toward the group facing Esteban and Roberto without making his presence known.

"You say Yes, and then you say No," Esteban was telling Rita. "How I know you do not change your mind again, eh?"

"I am ready now," Rita whispered slowly.

General Esteban began to relent.

"Call the padre," he informed one of his friends.

Stewart leaped forward.

"Stop!" he commanded. "Throw up your hands!"

Esteban whirled on him furiously. Gonzales and the others released Roberto and turned their attention to Jim.

"Steady!" Jim warned as Esteban started to level Jim's own gun at him.

Over the railing came a dozen Rangers, Wilkins, still wet, among them. General Esteban's face turned a pasty white.

"This man is my prisoner," Stewart announced triumphantly. "General Esteban, I arrest you in the name of the State of Texas!"

"Out of my way, Gringo!" the General roared. "You be careful or I shoot you with the one over there!"

"I'm afraid your shooting days are over," Jim muttered unpleasantly. "Make another move like that and I'll drop you right here."

"I am the boss," Esteban shouted. "My word is law in San Luca!"

"In San Luca—not in Texas!"

"Texas?" he gasped. He threw a hurried glance at the shore. It was unfamiliar.

"Yes, Texas," Stewart enlightened him, "ever since this merry little night club of yours drifted across the Rio Grande."

The General edged toward the rail and peered across the river. He knew from the position of Fremont that Jim was telling the truth. The backbone seemed to melt out of him. His uniform began to sag and bulge. He shot a glance at Gonzales. He had his hands up with the others.

Roberto had been untied by Wilkins. The boy laughed as his eyes caught the General's.

Words were unnecessary to convey his thought.

"Somebody is cut the cable," he groaned. "My country settle you for this," he stormed at Jim.

"You're quite a detective, Esteban," Jim said softly. "Someone did cut the cable—or maybe it broke. *Quien sabe?*"

"General Esteban to you," the big man snorted. He tried to draw himself up with a semblance of his old dignity, but somehow the effect was not convincing.

"I have another name for you," Stewart informed him.

The General began to act like a trapped rat. His little eyes were never still as they wandered from Rita to Jim and over to Roberto.

"What you mean?" he tried to bluff.

"You are the Kinkajou! You overstepped yourself when you cracked the Fremont bank."

"It's a lie!" Esteban shouted. "I make you pay for this."

Chick and Lovett were having the fidgets themselves.

"Thank God I don't know anything about that money," Chick sighed.

Lovett wished that he had thrown it away as he had told Chick.

"You were right, Ed," Chick went on. "You didn't get rid of it too soon."

General Esteban's guests were aghast at this turn of events. They had known him for a

free-booter and adventurer, but only one or two had ever suspected that he and the Kinkajou were one.

Carmen whispered something to Roberto. Esteban began to recollect the girl's hostility to him and her uncanny ways of appearing in his affairs at the wrong time. In a flash it dawned on him that he might have her to thank for his present predicament.

He tried to slay her with a glance. Carmen gave him full measure in a smile that convinced him he was not mistaken in believing she had had a hand in his downfall.

"Captain Stewart, I have still another name for this man," Roberto announced. "He is not a Mexican. He is a Russian who was in the revolution at Vera Cruz. His name is Ravenoff."

"You will have to prove these things," Esteban exclaimed hotly.

"Lovett has the money," Wilkins cut in. "Shall I get him, Jim?"

"Esteban gave it to me," Ed cried out. "I didn't steal it."

"And you were just keeping it to give it

back to the bank, I suppose?" Jim queried.

"Why—why I didn't mean anything. Chick and me was just having a little joke. I told the General the money belonged to the bank."

"Well, you can save yourself perhaps by testifying to that effect. But you'll have to go with Wilkins, Ed."

"Shall we take this baby away?" McGinn asked, alluding to Esteban.

Jim nodded. "No use keeping him here," said he.

Esteban tried to knock McGinn's hands off as he handcuffed him.

"Wait a minute, please," Roberto exclaimed. "I can't let you have him, Captain Stewart. I have worked too long to catch him."

Rita heard him out with amazement.

"What do you mean?" she cried.

"I understand what he means!" Jim told her. "Do you want to tell her, Roberto?"

"I'm sorry, Rita, that I cause you so much trouble. But I couldn't say anything until he was caught. The Mexican Secret Service has been just as anxious as the Rangers to arrest that man."

"And you are a Secret Service man?" Rita exclaimed incredulously. "*Madre de Dios!* And I was afraid you were the Kinkajou!"

"You know the truth now, Rita. Carmen, here has helped me. The General gave a certain government official one of those stolen thousand-dollar bills as a bribe. He turned it over to us. I had it on me when I was kidnapped by Esteban at the Mesa Franceisca. But we have more evidence than we need. We can convict him; maybe you can't, Captain."

"There's some truth in that," Jim admitted. "We stole him from you. But maybe we can fix that. We might make a trade, Roberto."

"A trade? What have I got to offer you? I would give a great deal to have that bandit back in Mexico, but there is nothing I possess that——"

"Yes, there is," Jim interrupted with a smile. He put his arm around Rita. "I'll see that he is turned over to you in the morning. A launch will be here directly to take the rest of you ashore."

The old padre edged his way through the crowd to Stewart's side.

"I was summoned here tonight to officiate at a wedding," the kindly old friar announced. "I—I don't seem to be needed."

"Not tonight, Padre," Rita said to him, a twinkle in her eyes.

"But tomorrow," Jim smiled at Rita.

The padre gave them his blessing.

"Leave them to themselves," he observed wisely to the others.

Jim led Rita away.

"Me prometes amor eterno?" Jim whispered as he took her into his arms.

"Si, con toda ma alma," she trilled happily. "You make pretty good Mexican sweetheart, my Jim."

THE END